

SHE'S OUR BEAUTY IN THE DARKNESS,
OUR DEPRAVED DREAM COME TRUE,

A DARK STEPBROTHER FAIRYTALE RETELLING

TARNISHED

Embers

ROSA LEE

TARNISHED EMBERS

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BLURB

Instead of two ugly stepsisters, I get four gorgeous stepbrothers.

Caspian, Oct, Kit and Prince.

The twins and their older stepbrothers. All more beautiful than the last. All as dark and depraved as demons. All with wounds that run so deep, there's no way to heal them.

Sounds like a fairytale right?

Wrong.

I do get the wicked stepmother, and when my father dies not long after their marriage, everything changes and suddenly all their secrets come to light and I'm in the middle of something that nightmares are made from.

There's no fairy godmother coming to magic me a pumpkin coach and a pretty dress. No Prince Charming to rescue me from a life of torment and punishment.

Just four wicked boys with black souls, and dark pasts who are just as trapped as I am.

Tarnished Embers is a dark contemporary stepbrother fairytale retelling, where our girl (and the guys) will end up with more than one love interest. If you love broken bad boys, a FMC who's not afraid to take what she wants and don't mind a whole load of heartache then this is the book for you! Be warned, love hurts.

***Warning: 18+ Please be aware that this book may contain graphic scenes that some readers may find upsetting or triggering, so please read the author's note at the beginning.

Disclaimer: Please note. Rosa Lee cannot be held responsible for the destruction of underwear of any kind. She recommends you take adequate precautions before reading to avoid any sticky situations.

*Dedicated to all those princesses who craved four morally
grey stepbrothers who would tell you you're such a good little
sister...*

This above all, to thine own self be true

— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

I love books with playlists and I listen to my compiled playlist as I'm writing. I've even based some scenes solely around one track, listening to it on repeat to really get into the vibe.

Listen to the full playlist on Spotify [HERE](#)

Too Sad To Cry by Sasha Alex Solan

Queen of Disaster by LULLANAS

Boys Like You by Taner lle

wicked game by Jessie Villa

Heaven by Julia Michaels

You Put A Spell On Me by Austin Giorgio

War of Hearts (Acoustic Version) by Ruelle

Afterlife by Halle Steinfeld

Hail Mary by Skott

Gods & Monsters by Lana Del Rey

Earned It by The Weekend

dying on the inside by Nessa Barrett

White Lies by Bolshiee

Escape by Azee

Find You by The Phantoms

Tidal Wave by Chase Atlantic

Poison by Freya Ridings

Stroke by BANKS

Elephant by Freya Ridings

LOVERS HURRICANE by Selin

Lost My Mind by Alice Kristiansen

Wake Me Up by Tommee Profitt, Fleurie

Hurts Like Hell by Tommee Profitt, Fleurie

Lifts by Lia Marie Johnson

Carry You by Ruelle, Fleurie
Scared of the Dark by Lil Wayne, Ty Dolly \$ign,
XXXTENTACION
The Other Side by Ruelle
Lost It All by Jill Andrews
Old Money by Lana Del Rey
<3 by memyself&vi
Lonely by Nathan Wagner
Astronomical by SVRCINA
Lovely - Slowed & Reverb by Denial
Face in a Crowd by Freya Ridings
listen before i go by Billie Eilish
Slip Away by UNSECRET, Ruelle
Hold A Man by Dean Lewis
What Was I Made For? By Billie Eilish
Demons by Jacob Lee
Kerosene by Rachel Loren
Wild Love - Acoustic by Jame Bay
Right Here by Chase Atlantic

FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

Firstly, thank you so much for choosing to read *Tarnished Embers*. I hope you enjoy it and that it satisfies all of your dark needs!

I've wanted to write a stepbrother romance for quite some time, and decided that things are always better in multiples, so I call this stepbrothers on crack as Ember gains not one but four hot as sin brothers in one fell swoop, lucky bitch!

Ember is different from some of my other FMCs, she's not a badass, all guns blazing type of girl. In many ways she's like me when I was younger, hates confrontation and often holding her tongue to keep the piece. I hope her inaction doesn't leave you annoyed, but rather sympathetic to her journey, and she goes on one hell of a journey to find herself and her voice.

The guys also suffer from being in a manipulative relationship with Odette, which means that sometimes they don't make the right decisions, but again, I hope you don't hold it against them. They have a journey to go on too.

As mentioned in the blurb, *Tarnished Embers* is a dark romance. There are many subjects explored some readers may find disturbing, such as sexual assault, rape, self harm and suicide. There are also a lot of graphic sex scenes. Please, if you find any of these things triggering, turn back now!

For a full list of triggers please visit www.rosaleeauthor.com/trigger-warnings

Also a small word of caution. My books have a lot of BDSM vibes in them, and if they inspire you to dive into that kinky world, please do your research and educate yourself before trying out anything new for the first time. Take care my little smut bunnies!

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

“Queen of Disaster” by LULLANAS

[Chapter 2](#)

“wicked game” by Jessie Villa

[Chapter 3](#)

“Heaven” by Julia Michaels

[Chapter 4](#)

“You Put a Spell On Me” by Austin Giorgio

[Chapter 5](#)

“Afterlife” by Hailee Steinfeld

[Chapter 6](#)

“Gods and Monsters” by Lana Del Ray

[Chapter 7](#)

“Earned It” by The Weekend

[Chapter 8](#)

“Dying on the Inside” by Nessa Barrett

[Chapter 9](#)

“White Lies” by Bolshiee

[Chapter 10](#)

“Escape” by Azee

[Chapter 11](#)

“Tidal Wave” by Chase Atlantic

[Chapter 12](#)

“Stroke” by BANKS

[Chapter 13](#)

“Elephant” by Freya Ridings

[Chapter 14](#)

“LOVERS HURRICANE” by Selin

[Chapter 15](#)

“Lost My Mind” by Alice Kristiansen

[Chapter 16](#)

“Wake me Up” by Tommee Profitt, Fluerie

Chapter 17

“Lifts” by Lia Marie Johnson

Chapter 18

“Carry You” by Ruelle

Chapter 19

“Sacred of the Dark” by Li Wayne, Ty Dollar Sign, XXXTENTACION

Chapter 20

“Lost It All” by Jill Andrews

Chapter 21

“Love Me Harder” by Ariana Grande

Chapter 22

“Old Money” by Lana Del Ray

Chapter 23

“Lonely” by Nathan Wagner

Chapter 24

“empty crown” by YAS

Chapter 25

“Astronomical” by SVRCINA

Chapter 26

“The Other Side” by Ruelle

Chapter 27

“listen before i go” by Billie Eilish

Chapter 28

“Half a Man” by Dean Lewis

Chapter 29

“What Was I Made For?” by Billie Eilish

Chapter 30

“Once upon a Dream” by Lana Del Rey

Chapter 31

“Bad Dreams - Stripped” by Fauzia

Chapter 32

“Steady Now” by nilu

Chapter 33

“Fuck You” by Silent Child

Chapter 34

“Face in the Crowd” by Freya Ridings

[Chapter 35](#)

“Wild Love - Acoustic” by James Bay

[Chapter 36](#)

“Right Here” by Chase Atlantic

[Chapter 37](#)

“Contaminated” by BANKS

[Chapter 38](#)

“In Hell I’ll be in Good Company” by The Dead South

[Chapter 39](#)

“Blood // Water” by grandson

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Rosa Lee](#)

PROLOGUE

“TOO SAD TO CRY” BY SASHA ALEX
SLOAN

EMBER

Pain.

I'll never breathe again, never feel at peace now that she's gone. My aching heart is fractured and broken, lying in pieces, scattered like the dirt we just threw on her grave.

A shiver leaves my body feeling cold as I stare at her place in the woods, the place where she wanted to be buried, surrounded by the nature that she so loved. But all I feel is agony ripping my heart in two, leaving me an empty husk of who I once was.

How will I go on now that the woman who gave me life breathes no more? How will I navigate the world without her gentle guidance, her love that protects me from all the monsters that hide in the shadows?

A single tear tracks down my cheek, warm against my frozen skin. My fingers lift, brushing it away, the moisture glistening on my fingertip in the frozen sunlight.

Her death wasn't easy. I wish I could take solace and say that her death was quick, but cancer isn't that kind. What took a lifetime to build, barely took a matter of weeks to tear her apart. I watched as she wasted away, every second stretching to feel like hours, my mother deteriorating right before my eyes. Her very soul slipped through my fingers and there wasn't a fucking thing I could do about it. No matter how

tightly I held her hand, how many tears soaked the pillow on her bedside, how hard I cried out for someone, anyone to spare her, no one did. No one could. And when my eyes no longer held any tears left to shed, I sat uselessly at her bedside and watched the light dim from her eyes. When my throat became so raw that I could no longer hear the sounds of my sobbing and hapless pleas, I heard the last breath as it rattled out of her chest, the sound deafening in its finality. It is that sound...not my pain...that will haunt me for the rest of my days.

“Come on, my Little Spark.” My father’s deep voice is broken and rough as he places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes gently. I’m surprised I can feel it since everywhere else on my body is numb. “It’s just you and me now, kid.”

Tears drip down my face, the sunshine of the late autumn day a mockery of the hurt that surrounds me and the despair that’s trying to pull me under. I want to go where it leads, promising me oblivion, a way out of the agony of losing her.

I hate that term. Like I just put her down and forgot where I left her. There’s no finding her again though, she’s gone forever and nothing can bring her back.

I tear my eyes away from the spot under the old oak tree to look up at my father. Dark circles ring his eyes, and although his suit is wrinkle-free, his hair and light beard neat, the sadness in his blue eyes matches my own. Maybe even surpasses it. He’s just as broken as I am. She was the love of his life and I can’t imagine the agony he must be feeling knowing that she’s gone.

“O–okay, Dad,” I whisper, my voice sounding hollow to my ears like I’ve wandered into a cave and can’t find my way to the light. “Let’s go home.”

I wince, knowing that our small house will never feel like home again without her there to make it bright and cheery. But, just like the world refused to stop spinning when she died, life goes on and at least Dad and I have each other.

We’ll always have each other.

CHAPTER ONE

“QUEEN OF DISASTER” BY LULLANAS

FIVE YEARS LATER...

EMBER

“Dad! I’m home!” I yell before kicking the heavy wooden door closed behind me as I walk through it. Sighing heavily, I take in the mansion we now live in with a slight grimace.

Dad threw himself into his work after Mum passed, and turns out he’s really fucking good at business and made a shit ton of money. So we left our perfectly reasonable, Victorian townhouse in North London two years ago for this McMansion in Chelsea. Don’t get me wrong, it’s nice. Just not home. There’s no soft, colourful furnishings that Mum loved. No sense of chaos with pictures and letters stuck to the fridge. It’s too...clean, almost like it’s a showhome, cold and empty of life. Or maybe that’s just me.

“I’m in here, Little Spark,” he calls out from the living room. Well, the yellow living room because this place is so big that we have to define our reception rooms by fucking colour. Warmth fills my chest at the sound of his voice. He isn’t often here and hasn’t been around much for the past five years, so every time he is, it feels like a gift, something to treasure.

I dump my bag on the hall table, smile at Reginald—*yes, we now have an honest to fuck butler*—and head to the yellow

room. I chose the colour for this room when we moved in because yellow is my favourite. It's soft, like freshly churned butter, and I spend lots of time drawing in here as the lighting is fantastic. The others I left to the interior designer that Dad hired, only this and my room holds any interest for me.

"You won't believe what happened today—" I come up short, pausing in the doorway when I see a woman standing next to my dad, his arm wrapped around her waist as they both look at me expectantly. My stomach tenses as they just stare at me, matching smiles on their faces. "Um, hi?"

"Honey, this is Odette." My dad beams at me, his smile wide as he turns his face away from me to gaze down at her. My heart pounds at the look he's giving her. He's practically glowing with hearts in his fucking eyes.

"It's so lovely to finally meet you, Ember," she gushes in an American accent that I can't quite place while stepping out of my father's embrace and rushing towards me. She's pretty, like really pretty, and maybe a little younger than Dad, although for all I fucking know she's got a talented surgeon. Her dark brown hair is styled to perfection, falling in waves around her heart-shaped face, and her hazel eyes stare into mine as she grabs my hands, squeezing them before pulling me in for a hug.

I freeze, my arms hanging at my sides and my eyes wide as I look over at my dad. His smile is indulgent as he stares at us, his face all soft lines, and I must admit that he looks happier than I've seen him in a long time. He's never brought a woman home before, and having her arms around me feels weird, like a distant memory that you can't quite grasp. When was the last time a woman held me close like this? Was it my mother? And who is this woman that hugs me so tightly now? Who is she to my Dad?

She pulls away but keeps hold of my hands in her soft, manicured ones. Heat touches my cheeks when I see the paint under my own short nails.

"Silly me! You have no idea who I am, and here's me already celebrating the fact that I've finally got a daughter."

She titters, and I find the back of my teeth hurting with the sound.

“W–what?” My pulse rushes past my ears at her words, and I can’t help but blink rapidly as if that will help to make sense of her words. My hands hang loosely in Odette’s, shock rendering me immobile, unable to react aside from blinking like an idiot. *Daughter?*

“Honey,” Dad starts as he walks over to us, deep laugh lines at the corners of his eyes when he once again wraps his arms around Odette’s waist. He’s completely oblivious to my shock, only having eyes for the woman before me. Though why I’m surprised he doesn’t notice my obvious discomfort when he’s never around is just another way I torture myself, stuck in the way that things used to be before Mum passed away. “I have some exciting news. Odette and I—”

“We got married!” Odette interrupts loudly, letting go of one of my hands to flash her left hand at me. There on her ring finger sit two rings, both white gold and one with a fucking massive diamond in the middle.

My stomach plummets, my skin going ice-cold as I look at the bands, then slowly back up into their faces. Both have huge grins, and I just stand there, barely able to breathe, let alone say anything. There’s a tightness in my chest that feels like betrayal. *How could he have not only dated her in secret but married her all without saying a single fucking thing to me?*

The past five years since Mum passed away have been tough. It wasn’t obvious at first that Dad was withdrawing, spending more time at work, going on extended business trips, and missing things that were important to me until I rarely saw him at home. It’s like he’s become a stranger, and in a way, why should I be surprised that I knew nothing of Odette when he didn’t tell me anything about his life?

“Aren’t you going to wish your father and I congratulations?” Odette questions, her smile looking a little forced the longer I remain silent. Her grip on my hand becomes almost painful, and I have to swallow the wince that

wants to escape as she practically crushes my fingers in hers. I want to pull away, my body screaming at me to take my hand back, but I'm at war with myself, not wanting to cause a scene or do anything to upset my dad. It's like because he's here, I'm terrified that he'll leave again if I make the wrong move.

I lick my dry lips, swallowing nothing as I try to form the word. *Don't rock the boat, Ember. I'm sure he has a reason for not telling you...* It's wishful thinking on my part though that he'll let me know what that reason is. "C-congratulations."

I hate that I don't call him out for not telling me, for keeping such a huge secret, and showing me that yet again, I don't factor into his life anymore. I should have learnt that lesson the first time he missed one of my school art exhibitions because of some work thing, but like a fool, I can't help but keep holding out that he'll change back to the dad I knew before Mum died. I have to widen my lids, moisture threatening to gather in my eyes and spill down my cheeks at the fucking shock of it all.

He's married?

"Hey, Little Spark," my dad says soothingly, reaching around and placing a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. His touch is like a balm, and some of the tension slips from me even though I know I should hold onto my anger at being left out and should express it in some way, but I just can't, the cross words unable to leave my mouth as I look into the eyes of the only family I have left. He held me like this the day we stood by my mother's grave, but this couldn't be further from that reality. "I know it feels like a big surprise, and I'm sorry I didn't talk about it with you sooner, but I'm happy." His lips tilt up into a smile, the kind I've not seen in a long time. "Odette makes me happier than I've felt since..."

Since Mum died. I know that's what he means, and suddenly, I feel like the worst bitch alive. I take a deep, shaking breath before plastering a smile on my face that only wavers a little and blinking back the tears. I'm mostly successful.

“If you’re happy, then so am I.” I tell them both, noticing the way Odette’s smile drops slightly as she looks at me, a frown threatening her botoxed brow. “Welcome to the family, Odette.” I glance at my Dad, hoping he doesn’t notice my robotic tone or the way my smile is so brittle it’s liable to snap off.

Her face instantly smooths as my dad gazes down at her, and I wonder briefly why she hid her annoyance from him.

“That means so much, Ember, and I really can’t wait to spend more time with you, just us girls together. Lord knows I need it after being surrounded by the boys these past few years.” She giggles, the sound making me inwardly wince as it’s like nails on a chalkboard, high-pitched and just fake as fuck. *Rein in your inner bitch, Ember.*

“Boys?” I ask, my forehead wrinkling as I hear the front door opening followed by the sounds of several people talking, and by the low timbre of their voices, it’s several guys.

“Ember, these are your new stepbrothers,” my father introduces, a gleam of yearning in his tone. He has always wanted a son, yet I ended up being his only child. Sweat makes my palms slick, I catch the flicker of Odette’s lip curling just as my stomach flips. *How can I share him after all this time? After all these years of it just being us? He barely has any time for me, and now I have to not only share him with another woman but who knows how many boys too?* My breathing rasps as panic looms at the edges of my vision.

I turn, letting go of Odette’s hand, and once again am rooted to the spot as four boys step through the door, chasing my panic away and replacing it with a bolt of lust that is really bloody inappropriate given who these guys are to me. Though, perhaps boys is the wrong descriptor. Men, or maybe even gods would be more accurate because Jesus fucking Christ they are unlike any boys I’ve ever seen before.

Four pairs of eyes lock onto me, four gazes that somehow make me feel like a deer caught in headlights even though not a word is spoken.

“Hello, little sister, nice to meet you.” My chest tightens and my breathing becomes shallow as a guy with walnut-coloured hair and a closely cropped beard steps forward from the group. His hair is longer on the top and has that artful bedhead look I guess took him some fucking time to master. Or maybe he’s just blessed with messy hair.

His voice is deep, American, and has a low drawl that sets my nerves tingling and my core pulsing. Not to mention the dark ink that peeks from his collar and over the thick column of his throat. He has a small tattoo under one eye, and a hoop through his left nostril that adds to his bad boy persona. I can’t move, frozen by his mere proximity as he steps up to me, so close that my breasts brush his chest, my nipples stiffening at the light contact, and I have to crane my neck in order to look him in the eyes. Irises the colour of bright copper pennies stare back at me, and they’re such an unusual colour that I’m captivated, unable to look away from the intensity of his stare.

He reminds me of when the clocks go back and suddenly it’s darker than it was the day before, leaving you fearful and out of sync, wondering where the time has gone. A shiver cascades across my skin and his lips lift in a devastating smirk.

I take a stuttering inhale through my nose and am flooded with the tart scent of crisp apples mixed with the sweet smell of caramel. My eyelids close reflexively as he leans in, a large hand landing on my waist and heating the skin underneath my school shirt before he presses his lips to my cheek in a barely-there kiss, his scruff tickling my skin.

“Fucking delicious,” I think I hear him say in a deep, gravelly whisper, the hand at my waist tightening ever so slightly and letting me know I didn’t imagine his possessive touch. He pulls back but his palm remains there, warming me in a way that I don’t hate. My mind tells me this is weird given he’s my stepbrother, but my body is saying hello to the handsome devil before me. “I’m Caspian.” His American accent is different than Odette’s, and I wonder why they sound different. If I had to guess, it sounds like maybe he’s from New York, but as that’s based solely on films and endless reruns of *Friends*, I could be wrong.

I swallow once. Twice. “N–nice to meet you.”

“Hey, quit hogging her, big bro!” another low voice cries out, also with an American accent but different again to Odette and Caspian’s. *Why do they sound different? If these are her sons wouldn’t they all have the same accent?*

Caspian is shoved aside to be replaced with one of the others whose hair is lighter than his brother’s, a honey brown, and he screams surfer vibes with it falling in soft waves framing a gorgeously handsome face. My lips want to tug up to match the beaming smile of his own but I keep the impulse in check, not wanting to give that part of me away just yet. His eyes are a beautiful clear blue, like a tropical sea shining under a sun-kissed sky, and everything about him calms my frantic pulse. That he puts me at ease with such little effort is a huge red flag though. It’s always the most charming devils that will take your soul. “We’ve always wanted a little sister.”

I let out a squeak as I’m abruptly wrapped up in a tight hug, my feet dangling off the floor when I’m lifted off the ground. *Damn, tall bastard.* I position my hands on his muscular shoulders as another kiss is placed upon my cheek, which is now tingling due to all the attention, and I’m feeling pretty hot suddenly, sweat beading down my spine as he sets me on my feet again. My hands refuse to move from his muscular shoulders, my grip tightening ever so slightly to feel just how stacked he is. His cheeky smirk tells me he knows exactly what I’m doing and doesn’t hate it. A distinctive floral scent fills my nostrils, and it reminds me of rolling around the wild meadows back on Hampstead Heath in North London as a child.

I look over his shoulder to my dad, to see if he’s noticed the very friendly way my new brothers are greeting me, but he only has eyes for Odette, gazing at her as if she hung the moon. She trails a finger down his chest and my nose wrinkles at the come fuck me eyes she gives him. *That’s a bit gross.*

“You never were good at sharing,” a third voice teases with the same accent as the guy currently holding me, and then I’m torn from his embrace, my head spinning as I stare at the same man who just had me in his arms. But no, his eyes are a

darker blue, like a stormy sea ready to swallow any unfortunate souls sailing on it. His hair is the same honey shade as his brother's, but it's shorter and far less tousled. He holds me at arm's length, his eyes raking over me, burning a path across my body, and I shudder. "Well, aren't you a pretty little thing."

My lips part as my cheeks heat and I take a deep inhale, getting a faint whiff of lime, mimosa, and cedar, which does strange things to my insides.

"So pretty," the first twin answers, crowding next to the newcomer whose hands still grasp my upper arms in a firm grip. "But where are our manners, brother? I'm Octavious or Oct, and this is my twin, Christopher or Kit."

"P-leased to meet you both," I stutter. "I'm Ember."

"Oh, we know all about you, Pretty Thing," Chri—Kit purrs. The way he calls me pretty sends another tremor along my nerves.

"Y-you do?" My brows dip, because until they walked in, I knew sweet fuck all about these guys. *How did they know about me? Did Dad meet them already?* My chest tightens at the thought that I've been left out once more, becoming an outsider in my own family.

"We do, Sugar," a last voice informs me, and oh my gods. His deep, southern drawl has my kitty cat up and demanding tummy rubs, which is highly fucking inappropriate given that they're my stepbrothers. The twins part, Kit's hands dropping as another sinfully gorgeous guy steps towards me. His hair is pitch black, so dark that it almost has blue highlights. His eyes are a bright, sparkling green that leaves me gasping for breath, filling my nose with the intoxicating scent of rum, leather, and spice. "We know *everything* about you, Ember." I swallow as he, too, steps into me, forcing my head up in order to maintain eye contact. They're all taller than I am, not difficult at my five foot five and a half, but this one is taller than the others. Maybe a little older too as there's an air of maturity about him that the others don't have, like he has more responsibilities than them somehow. Swirls of colourful ink peek out from his

collar, and a spark of electricity runs through me. I'm a sucker for tattoos on a guy. "I'm Prince, the eldest one."

"N-nice to m-meet you, Prince." I'm so pissed at sounding like a simpering damsel, but give a girl a break. A lot has happened in the past ten minutes. He leans closer, dipping his head to place his lips against my cheek in a lingering kiss and I swear to all that is holy, sparks fly from where he makes contact.

"It's nice to finally make your acquaintance too, Ember," he replies while taking a small step back, and I would laugh at his old-fashioned way of speaking but I can't look away from his eyes which are locked on mine. They sparkle and shine like the green sapphires I saw once in a jewellery store in Hatton Gardens. Then he reaches down, takes my hand in his, and brings it up to his pillowy lips, brushing my knuckles with a barely-there kiss and sending my pulse skyrocketing.

"Well," my father states, breaking the spell that Prince has me under, and I look towards my dad as he walks over to us and claps the twins on the back. My brows gather together as I study him, but he seems completely oblivious to the fact that my new 'brothers' are showing way more than brotherly affection to me. Then again, I don't know why I'm surprised. He's not exactly paid me much attention these past five years, too wrapped up in work to notice that I was grieving too. Although apparently, not too busy to find himself a new wife and four sons. "You boys must be tired after travelling today. Ember, can you show them to their rooms?"

My attention snaps over to the guys to see that they look like they've been on a journey. Their T-shirts are wrinkled and there's an air of tiredness about them all that only travel gives you. I don't recall Odette being the same, but maybe she arrived earlier, which would have been strange. Or maybe she's just not the type of person to allow a wrinkle anywhere near her. My father's words hit me then.

"Their rooms?" I ask, biting my lower lip as I frown. I swear I hear a soft growl from nearby, which can't be right as we don't have a dog, much to my disappointment. Why does he not ask Reginald, our butler, to show them?

“Of course, Little Spark. Where did you think they were going to stay? We’re a family now,” my dad answers, his smile so wide that it reaches his eyes and leaves them sparkling.

A family. *I thought we already were a family...*

“Silly me.” I give a small huff that I mean to be a laugh, but it sounds strained instead as I try to swallow the hurt that keeps threatening to spill out of my mouth. Fingers give my hand a squeeze, and I startle, looking down to see Prince still holding it. “W—where are their bedrooms?” I ask, looking back up at my dad and ignoring the way Prince’s hand feels so comforting in mine, like it belongs there.

“We thought it would be best if they were in your wing, Ember,” Odette informs me, coming over and wrapping her hands around my father’s bicep. She reminds me of a possessive snake, claiming its prize and warning off any others. The thought sends unease running through me. Plus, it’s strange that she’s not greeted the boys, her sons, isn’t it? There must be a story there given how close all the boys look in age. They also don’t look alike, aside from the twins that is. Maybe they’re half-brothers? Although that wouldn’t explain the different accents as surely they would all sound similar if they kept moving as children? My head spins with all the questions racing around it, and I shake it as if to clear it.

“Oh—um—sure,” I reply, back to the stammering idiot as my dad and Odette smile at me. So not only have I lost my father but also my private space? *Way to sound like an entitled little rich bitch, Ember.* I’ll still have my own room, and a part of me wonders if I can lose something that I didn’t really have in the first place. Taking a deep inhale, I look back at the guys, my new stepbrothers, their beauty stealing my breath for a moment. “Do you guys want to follow me?”

“Lead the way, Pretty Thing,” Kit tells me with a smile that should really be illegal because my brain short-circuits and I can’t remember my own fucking name, let alone what we were about to do.

“The bedrooms, Sugar?” Prince adds after an embarrassingly long moment, and I blink several times, heat

colouring my cheeks again.

“Right, yep, um, this way then.” Please, for the love of all that is holy, someone either smite me now or stop me from sounding like such a twat.

I take a step forward, then pause when my hand tugs, and I glance over my shoulder to see Prince still clasping it. He gives me what I can only describe as a smouldering smile—whoops, there goes my knickers—and then raises his brows as if I’m the one holding us up again.

Narrowing my eyes at him, I spin and lead us out of the room towards the staircase, gorgeous stepbrothers in tow and Prince still holding my hand like he owns it.

Fuck. My. Life.

Only I would get cursed with four hot-as-hell stepbrothers. Fate clearly thinks that she’s a funny bitch. Well, I’ll be sending her the bill when my vibrator breaks from all the overuse it’ll be getting from now on.

“Oh, you won’t need a vibrator now that we’re here,” Oct’s teasing voice says far too loudly as we walk up the stairs. My eyes widen and my body jerks to a halt as I realise I must have spoken aloud, and Prince bumps into me, his hand clinging to mine while his other comes around me to hold me steady. Fire races from every part of me he touches, and once again, my brain has up and left, leaving my pussy in charge, who’s rolling over and waiting for belly rubs.

“He’s right, Sugar,” Prince whispers in my ear, and I can’t take a single inhale as his warm, rum-scented breath washes over me like a soft, teasing caress. “After all, what are brothers for if not to take care of their sister in times of need?”

Lightning traces across my entire body at his words, and I can’t fucking breathe. It’s just so much to take in. A new stepmother, and four gorgeous stepbrothers that my body craves even though it’s all kinds of fucked up and wrong. Add the fact that they talk like this, like they might want me as much as I seem to want them...

“Breathe, Little Cinders.” Caspian’s copper eyes fill my gaze, his warm palms cupping my face, and I take a gasping inhale, the flood of oxygen filling my lungs and leaving me lightheaded. “That’s it. Good girl.” My eyelids flutter at the praise, and his thumbs stroke my cheeks, soothing me. “These assholes didn’t mean to overwhelm you, we’re just excited is all. You’re more than we could have ever hoped for.”

“I—I am?” My voice is soft, barely above a breath, but he hears it and gives me a smile that warms me down to my toes.

“So much more,” Prince murmurs against my ear, and I sink back into him, despite my mind screaming that this is wrong. It seems like my body is giving her the middle finger and taking what it wants right now.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Pretty Thing,” Kit says from next to us, and my head turns slowly, as if it’s underwater, only to be caught in his stormy stare.

“Gorgeous,” Oct adds from the other side, and I swing my gaze to him, letting myself get lost in his sparkling, blue eyes.

“Boys...” Caspian warns in a dark tone, and they all step away, even Prince, his hand falling from mine. I’m suddenly left feeling bereft while moisture threatens to fill my eyes, and I want to hide but Caspian’s grip on my cheeks won’t let me, and his face softens the longer I stare at him. “Let’s get to the rooms, okay?” I nod as a single tear escapes. I don’t know why I feel like bawling my eyes out, but the lump in my throat won’t go away. He leans in, kissing the tear away and my body relaxes the moment his lips make contact. A part of me knows that I shouldn’t feel this...that I shouldn’t feel comfortable with him, but he’s like the balm my soul needed and has been yearning for for so long. “It’ll be okay, Little Cinders. We’ll make sure of it.”

His words give me the strength that I didn’t know I needed, and my hand reaches up, taking one of his off my cheek and tangling our fingers together.

“Okay.” A long exhale falls from my lips and the smile that he gives me is the stuff that poets dream about. “This way.”

“BOYS LIKE YOU” BY TANERÉLLE

CASPIAN

Fucking captivating.

Ember Jane Everly is utterly spellbinding and I can see my stepbrothers are just as affected as I am. Our obsession with her took root six months ago when Odette told us about her and we found pictures of her online, but none of them did her justice as her beauty is incomparable.

We've been watching her ever since and following her socials. Oct even tracks her movements using his computer skills, discovering every little detail about her. Like the fact that she doesn't go out much, doesn't really have any close friends, and mostly stays at home. It was the ultimate tease, not knowing what she was up to every second of the day since this house doesn't have cameras, so we couldn't watch her as much as we'd have liked.

The lack of information online didn't stop our fixation and didn't stop us from pouring over every picture we could get hold of, fantasising about what we'd do once we finally got her to ourselves.

I didn't exactly lie when I told her we would look after her, that we would make sure everything was alright, but Odette promised us a plaything of our very own, a gift for being such good and dutiful sons, and we intend to indulge all of our darkest fantasies.

I just didn't expect to find her so...addicting. I clutch her hand in mine, Prince giving me the stink eye even though he knows that I'm the best one out of us all for calming her down. I've got just the right amount of command and care.

Prince, on the other hand, wants to devour her and infect every part of her until she doesn't know who she is anymore. He may come across as a Southern gentleman, but he craves the ultimate control that only comes with ownership. The twins are tricksters, they'll play with her until she doesn't even realise that she's been broken. Oh, she'll enjoy every moment, but she'll be destroyed by the time they're through.

And me? I want to take care of her, wrap her up and smother her until she doesn't see anyone else, until she can anticipate my every desire and is desperate to fulfil it.

We've had years to dream about what it would be like to truly be in charge for once. To get what we crave most. For too long we've had to obey, and while it's been fun, it's also been a mind fuck that has threatened to destroy us. So to finally have some control is a heady feeling that none of us will give up anytime soon.

Ember just happens to be the only one, the only thing, that we have ever had control over.

And we plan to keep a tight rein on her.

CHAPTER TWO

“WICKED GAME” BY JESSIE VILLA

EMBER

With a still-racing heart, I lead the guys to my wing. There’s something about having my own wing in a house that makes me feel icky, even though it’s been this way for the past couple of years since we moved here. It’s like I’m one of the many entitled, rich bitches at Morley College, expecting everything to be handed to me. Though, if I’m being honest, it’ll be nice not to be all alone in this part of the house anymore.

Caspian still has a firm grip on my hand, and even if tingles race from the place where we touch, there’s a comfort in it that I’m not looking too deep into. I don’t have the mental capacity to examine why my new stepbrothers affect me this way or why I feel so settled in their presence. All I know is that a maelstrom of lust, want, and need has filled my core from the first moment they walked into the room.

My room sits in the middle of this hallway, overlooking the extensive formal gardens, and I didn’t get the significance until now, but there are four other bedrooms, two on either side of mine. Fate strikes again, fucking bitch.

“Mine is the middle,” I tell them, pausing at the first door we come across while pointing at mine. “The bedrooms on either side are unoccupied.”

“I like that you’ll be in the middle of us,” Oct teases, his hand skating down my arm, making all the hairs stand on end even though I’m wearing a long-sleeved shirt. I’ve the impression that he’s talking about more than the room, but before I can comment, he grabs the door handle and turns it, throwing open the carved, wooden door to reveal a room in the exact shade of blue as his eyes. Well, fuck me sideways.

No! No fornicating with your stepbrothers, Ember!

Again, my body disagrees as Caspian pulls us into the room, my entire being flooding with warmth at Oct’s words.

“This one is mine,” Oct states as he strides over to the French doors that open out onto a balcony. *Oh shit, the balcony.* I feel the blood drain from my face at the realisation. “A balcony that connects all the rooms, how convenient.” His voice is a low purr as he stalks back towards me like a jungle cat, just waiting to pounce. I clear my throat and chew on my lower lip, my thighs clenching together, trying to ease an ache that I’m refusing to admit is there.

“Yep, and they all have en suite bathrooms too. I’m sure you can change anything you don’t like,” I tell them in a slightly choked tone before looking around and trying to picture Oct’s enormous frame inside the space. They make these huge rooms feel small, and I don’t hate it. I love my room, it’s my sanctuary, but have often felt a little lost in this vast house, especially as normally, I’m the only one here aside from our staff who like to go about their business unseen and unheard. I have to swallow past the sudden lump in my throat before speaking once more, the idea that I might not be as alone as I have been hitting me hard. “Shall we see the others?”

Caspian’s hand squeezes mine as we leave Oct’s bedroom to open the next door, the room next to mine. Even though I knew the colours of the rooms up here, I’m still stunned to see that it’s also an exact match for Kit’s eyes. It’s painted blue, only a darker, moodier version with navy accents. *What the actual fuck is going on with my life?*

“It’s almost as if you knew we were coming,” Kit teases, walking around and eyeing the huge four-poster bed. Each room has one, complete with drapes that can be pulled shut to create an intimate sleeping space. Heat colours my cheeks at Kit’s words, and the bastard notices as he turns back to glance at me, a feline smile drawing his lush lips upwards. “What are you thinking about that has you blushing, Pretty Thing?”

“S—shall we move on?” I squeak out in a rush, turning on my heel and hurrying towards the door. Of course, I’m slowed down because Caspian won’t let go of my fucking hand.

“I want to see your room, Sugar,” Prince hums, and it’s not a request. No, there’s a note of command in his voice that renders me unable to deny him. *Damn, this is not good. Why can’t I resist them?*

Against my better judgement, I stop in front of my door, Caspian beside me and the others a furnace at my back. My free hand trembles as I reach out and grasp the handle, turning it while sunlight spills out of the room, filling me with sunshine and a lightness like it always does. For what feels like the first time since I walked into the house today, my lips pull up into a genuine smile.

“Fuck me, Little Cinders,” Caspian breathes out next to me, and I turn to look at him with raised brows. “We need to get you smiling like that more.”

I can feel the blush that seems to be a permanent fixture on my face deepen, and my pulse pounds as I look away, unable to hold his adoring stare any longer.

“This is me,” I tell them softly, inching into the space and trying to block the door as if I’m afraid they’ll somehow taint it with their...overbearing manliness. It’s a lost cause though because Caspian has a firm grip on my hand and uses it to move me aside.

“It’s perfectly you,” Prince declares, striding past me and looking around. I try to see what he means, to take it in as if for the first time. I was drawn to the soft yellow walls and the large windows that let in so much light; it’s an artist’s dream. Suddenly, my eyes widen, my stomach filling with damn

butterflies as I catch the corner of the room in front of the windows that has my easel set up, my paints and charcoals strewn messily on a table beside it.

Caspian finally lets go of my hand, only to casually stroll over to the art space. It's something that no one else has ever seen, not my father or any friends I've had over in the past, though there haven't been many of those. Cas's eyes take in the half-finished painting and then the others tacked onto the wall beside it.

"You're an artist?" he questions, his tone soft and almost reverent. The others join him while I'm rooted to the spot, wanting to bolt and scream at them to leave all at once. I can't see their faces fully, only the side of them, so I don't know what they're thinking. He turns to face me and then his eyes lock onto mine, something unreadable in his expression, and I still can't move, trapped as my soul is laid bare for these strangers. "Little Cinders, these are amazing." Something inside me warms, liking his praise, my body losing all tension as his words flow over me.

"I'm taking this one," Prince states, tearing my gaze from Caspian's as he reaches over to pluck a drawing from the wall. It's an ink and watercolour of a phoenix in flight, the bright orange and yellow colours dripping down the page, the ink splattered across it. I made it recently, feeling like after five years I was finally rising from the ashes that were left after Mum passed.

"Is that okay, Little Cinders?" Caspian asks seriously, and in that moment, I know that Caspian would tell Prince to fuck off if I said it wasn't okay. I've somehow gained a protector in the past half an hour, and it's enough to almost bring tears to my eyes. I swallow hard, my eyes flicking back to Prince who still holds my drawing, his expression intense, his brows lowered like he's waiting for me to deny him.

"S-sure," I say, licking my lips, and for a moment they all stare at me with molten fire in their gazes, their eyes shining like jewels. Prince's lips kick up in a half smile that leaves my knees weak, and I'm sure I'd give him all my drawings if he smiles at me like that every time.

“Then I want one,” Oct declares, his eyes leaving mine to roam over the wall. “That one.” He points to another of my watercolours, this one a pink, purple, and turquoise octopus, and I see it suits his surfer vibe. I made it recently too, after a rare day when Dad took time off work to take us for a weekend away by the sea in Cornwall. Part of me now wonders if he spent that time with me, knowing that Odette would soon join us and it wouldn’t be just him and I any longer. Oct carefully takes it off the wall, then reaches for another and pulls that off too. “This one can be yours, Kit.”

Kit takes the painting, also of an octopus, but this one is in shades of deep violet and navy with galaxy stars down its side and pouring out of it in an ink spill across the page. This image makes my chest tight because I painted it a few years back when I was in a bit of a dark place. My hand rubs over my shirtsleeve, over the scars that litter my forearm from that time, the reason I wear long shirts even on the warmest of days. Kit’s lips lift, and he looks up at me.

“You are exceptionally talented, Pretty Thing.”

“T–thank you,” I reply in a rasping whisper, feeling like I’m too raw. To most, these are just pictures of animals, but each one holds a special meaning to me, as if they’re a part of me. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t want to part with them, but for some reason, I don’t mind each of them taking one. I like that they’ll have such a special part of me with them.

“Will you choose one for me, Little Cinders?” Caspian pleads, and my gaze flies to him, my heart suddenly pounding. “Please?”

He holds his hand out, and the others stand back a little. Slowly, reluctantly, I inch towards him, my palms sweating and I’m not even sure why. I let him take my hand, and he pulls me in front of him, wrapping his arms around me from behind and engulfing me in his scent of caramel apples. It calms me, even though I know it shouldn’t because we’re effectively strangers, and I let myself sink into him just like I did with Prince on the stairs. A contented rumble sounds from his chest and he pulls me even closer. I let my hands rest on his arms, his muscles tensing and proving that he’s every bit a

man who could pin me down right. *Dammit, Ember! Not the fucking time for dirty thoughts of your stepbrother.*

My eyes roam over the drawings, noting the gaps now that the others have taken their paintings. Then my vision snags on a dragonfly in shades of red and bronze, and I know that this belongs to Caspian.

“Did you know dragonflies symbolise change? Transformation?” I tell them, leaving the warmth of Caspian’s embrace to reach for the picture and take it off the wall. “It reminds us to open our hearts to change and encourage us to feel relaxed, even when situations are difficult.” I turn and look at Caspian as I say the last part, his copper eyes so intense that they’re practically glowing. “This is the picture I think you should have, Cas.”

His irises flare brighter at the nickname that slips out from my lips, and his smile stops my heart altogether.

“Thank you, Ember.”

Oh lordt, when he says my name like that, like I’m something precious to be cherished and looked after, I can’t think of a single response.

“Why don’t you show Cas and I our rooms, darlin’?” Prince drawls from behind Cas, and blinking as if coming out of a daze, I look over at him and nod.

“Of course, you guys must be exhausted.”

“Not too tired to— Oomph.” I look at Oct, seeing him rub his side and giving Cas a death glare. A small giggle bursts from my lips, even as my cheeks warm, wondering what Oct was about to say. Surely he can’t have meant...

“Add that sound to the ‘noises we need Ember to make every day’ list,” Kit declares, striding forward and grabbing my hand before pulling me towards the door, the others following behind us.

“I’ve another sound I’d like to he— Fuck, dude!” Oct curses, and I know that Cas, who seems to have become my protector, has once again stopped Oct from saying something that might be a little too much for me right now.

I barely repress a groan when we reach the room on the other side of mine and open the door. Shades of green greets us, from a deep, almost black to a bright emerald and I know by the way that Prince saunters into the space that he's already laid claim to this one.

"I like the idea of being next door to you, Sugar," he purrs, and again, all the hair on my body stands on end as his gaze slides up and down me. I just hope the walls are thick, because the idea of him being able to hear every noise I make in my room is enough to have me in cold sweats.

"Can you show me my room, Little Cinders?" Cas gently asks, stepping in front of me and once again bringing me back to the present, grounding me in the way that he seems to be able to do. I could kiss him for that. *Fuck! No kissing your stepbrothers.*

Taking my hand in his again, he tugs me towards the door. Kit keeps hold of my other hand, both of them refusing to let me go, and I can't say that I dislike being between them.

We come to the last room at the end of the corridor, and before Cas even opens the door, I know just how wide his grin will be. I've never enjoyed the colour brown before, but when he looks back over his shoulder at me after opening the door, his copper eyes twinkling, I know that fate really is some kind of masochist.

"Aside from my bedroom, these rooms were all decorated by the interior designer Dad hired. I had nothing to do with the colours up here," I rush to tell them, feeling the need to justify how perfect these rooms are for each of them, but Cas's grin just gets wider.

"Of course they were," Oct says, his voice light and teasing as his fingers brush the back of my neck, sending a tremble over my muscles. Cas pulls me into his room, and as Kit refuses to let go of my hand, he comes too as we look around.

"Sirs, Miss," a male voice interrupts, and I jerk my hands out of their grasp, my fingers gripping each other tightly as I spin, looking at Reginald from across the room with wide

eyes. I can just make out the three guys around me, Oct still at my back, all with completely nonplussed expressions on their faces, the bastards.

“Yes, Reginald?” I ask, my voice higher-pitched than usual. My stomach churns, as if I’ve been caught doing something I shouldn’t have.

“I’ve instructed the staff to bring up the bags. We just need to know which room is whose?”

“Oh, of course. This is Cas’s— I mean Caspian’s room. The one next to this is Prince’s. Then Kit’s is on the other side of mine and Oct’s is next to his.”

“Thank you, Miss. I shall get the bags into their rightful places shortly,” he replies, giving us a small bow which still makes me cringe even though he’s been doing it since we moved here two years ago. If he saw anything before he spoke, he doesn’t make any kind of reference to it now, just turns and leaves like the professional he is. My shoulders rise and fall with a deep inhale, and then turning back around, I face the guys, my new stepbrothers, once more. I have to take a step back though when I find Oct smirking at me as he stands closer than before.

“I’ll leave you to settle in. I have some coursework I need to catch up on anyway. Dad has some plans for dinner, I’m sure, so I’ll see you then?” I don’t mean it to sound like a question, to sound so fucking desperate, like I need them more than I really ought to. I meant to be firm, confident, but I guess that ship has fucking sailed.

“Wouldn’t miss it, little sis,” Oct answers first, and I blink at the nickname. They’ve each given me one and although I always thought they were cheesy, I secretly have always wanted a guy to give me one. Preferably, one I was dating and not my new siblings, but this seems to be my life now so I may as well roll with it.

He strides towards me, leaning in to place a kiss on the corner of my lips, leaving them tingling and me aching for a little more. I know the placement is completely intentional as he gives me a wink and then saunters out of the door.

Kit is next, kissing the other side, and his tongue flicks out just briefly to taste me. A shuddering exhale leaves my lungs, but all I can do is stand still and flex my fingers at my sides as his hand ghosts across my hip. “See you soon, pretty thing.” And then he’s gone.

Prince stalks over to me, and something inside me recognises him as an apex predator, but my fight-or-flight mode is firmly stuck on freeze because I just watch, my heart pounding in my ears as he gets closer. His hand captures my chin, his jewel-green eyes tracing over my face as if he’s memorising every line. He lowers his face until his lips are a hair’s breadth from my own, and if I take a big inhale, I know that the distance will close. A part of me wants to do it too, and my lids lower over my eyes in preparation, his intoxicating, spiced rum scent making my head spin.

Instead, cold air hits my lips as his warm breath moves to my ear. “Until dinner.” His voice is a low, husky whisper and sends shivers cascading down my spine with the promise in his words.

I blink, and he’s gone, leaving me chilled and feeling empty, my arms coming up to wrap around myself. Then there’s just Cas left, standing a few feet away and watching me with an intense stare.

“Are you okay?” he asks gently, and my lips tremble as the past hour comes crashing down around me, a small whimper leaving my throat. It’s all just been so much, finding out that not only was my father seeing someone without telling me, but got married and I didn’t even get an invite, and now, not only do I have a new stepmother, but four super hot stepbrothers that I want to ride like a train, even though that’s all kinds of messed up. Never mind the fact that they seem to be interested in me as more than just their new sister. It’s all a fucking mess and tears sting my eyes as everything suddenly hits me. “Oh, baby.” He rushes over, sweeping me into his arms and pulling me so close that the front of our bodies mould together. “I know that this must be so fucking crazy for you, and I’m sorry to add to any kind of heartache that you’re going through,” he tells me, placing a kiss on the top of my trembling head, the

tears I was trying to hold back spilling down my cheeks at his sweet words. “But I won’t apologize for wanting you just as much as my brothers do. You are perfect, Ember. We will take care of you, whatever you need, you only have to ask and I swear it will be yours. There is just one thing we won’t do.”

I pull back, my neck craning even as my fingers clutch at his already wrinkled T-shirt, moisture dotting my eyelashes. “What’s that, Cas?”

“We won’t leave you alone. You are now ours. You are the first thing to ever truly belong to us, and we will never let you go.”

CHAPTER THREE

“HEAVEN” BY JULIA MICHAELS

EMBER

Pleasure shoots up my spine, my eyelids fluttering as I have the most intense sex dream I’ve ever had in my life. My entire body feels as though it’s on fire, my nerve endings tingling, leaving me mindless with pleasure.

“That’s it, little sister. Come all over your brother’s face,” a deep, husky voice whispers in my ear, and shivers tickle my skin as I struggle to drag myself awake.

The sparks flying from my core are all-consuming though, and I’m lost in the depth of just how fucking good it feels and how incredible the way his tongue moves is on my pussy, licking, sucking, and sending shock waves all across my body like he’s running a live wire over my skin.

“Fuuuuck,” I groan, my fingers tangling in the hair of my lover, pulling him closer, urging him deeper. His low rumbles of appreciation vibrate across my slick pussy, adding to my building orgasm, and I’m a slave to this euphoric feeling he’s giving me.

Another set of hands caresses my breasts and lips suck my nipples, Fucking hell...it’s like they both know exactly how to play me because I’m soon alight, my entire body going rigid as a pleasure so decimating I know I’ll be useless afterward sweeps me under.

They don't stop though, determined to wring out every last drop of my climax until I'm a twitching hot mess, whimpering and pleading for a reprieve.

It's the sound of my voice in my ears that has my eyes snapping open, noticing the soft morning sunlight that fills the room, highlighting the very real men in my bed. My heart stops beating as I lock eyes with Kit, his lips and chin glistening, and his face between my splayed thighs as he looks up at me with a sinful look in his stormy blue eyes. My fingers release their death grip on his hair, leaving it mussed and far too sexy looking.

"You're magnificent when you come, Ember," he says, his voice low and seductive. "You climaxed so beautifully on my tongue." As if to prove his point, he leans in and licks a long line from my opening to my clit, and electricity races up my nerve endings, my toes curling in pleasure even as my posture stiffens.

"W-what are you doing here?" I stammer, finally getting my tongue to work. I'm trembling from the intense orgasm and the shock of finding two of my new stepbrothers in bed with me, having just made me come so fucking hard I can barely think straight.

"I thought that was obvious, little sister," Oct draws from beside me, and a shiver raises all the hair on my body as he circles his finger around my damp, peaked nipple. "We were taking care of you, like you needed us to." His tone suggests that this is completely normal, having two of my new stepbrothers in my bed, playing my body like a musical instrument, and giving me the most intense orgasm of my life. I'm suddenly very aware that my tits are out and Kit is still between my legs. *What the fuck happened to my pyjamas?*

"Y-you can't be in here," I whisper, afraid if I say it any louder that my dad will somehow know and come rushing in and catch us, regardless of the fact I have my own wing. "This is so not okay." I bring my hands up, covering my eyes and nipples, wondering how in the space of twelve hours my life became such a shitshow.

I'm lying practically naked in my bed, wearing just my long-sleeved sleep top that has been pulled down so my breasts are exposed, with two of the most gorgeous men in existence giving me pleasure like I've never known. Only, they're my new stepbrothers, and this is just so, so wrong.

"Hey," Oct says softly, his hands grabbing mine and pulling them away, lightly pinning them on the bed either side of my head. He leans over, and all I can see is the blue tropical waters in his irises. "Don't hide from us, little sis. You were so wound up last night, and now you feel better, don't you?" His bright, turquoise eyes are just so fucking earnest, like he's talking about having made my favourite cake and not the fact that his brother just made me come.

"I—that is—um—yes. Yes, I do feel better." It's not a lie, my muscles are relaxed for the first time since I walked into our house yesterday afternoon. His sudden smile is like the clouds parting and the sun bursting through, warming me all over and adding to the feeling of contentment that my orgasm has left me in.

"See? So there's nothing to worry about," he tells me, brushing a kiss to my temple. My eyelids flutter, warmth flowing from his lips to soothe the worry that fills me.

"It can be our little secret, if you want?" Kit offers as I squirm, trying to get Oct to release me so I can pull my sleep top back up to cover myself a little. I'm completely naked from the waist down and I've no idea where my fucking shorts went.

"T—that might be for the best. If my father or Odette finds out..." I trail off, dread making my stomach churn and my movements freeze at the thought of what my father would do if he were to discover us. Whatever it would be, it wouldn't be good, and he's only just found happiness after all this time. I can't ruin it for him, even if I wish he'd been happy with just me.

"Then that's just what we'll do," Kit says, pushing up to kneeling. He's only wearing a pair of deep red boxer shorts, which showcases every one of his mouthwatering abs, as well

as some dark and moody tattoos across his pecs and down his arms. They also don't hide the hard length of him that pushes at the fabric. I flush hot as he chuckles, catching me ogling him, but before I can look away, he's lowering himself over me as Oct releases my hands, and that very solid member is nestling against my wet folds. "Like what you see, Emmmber?" He elongates my name, making it something sinful and decadent like rich, hot chocolate on a winter's day.

He gives me no chance to answer, slamming his lips onto mine in a kiss that short-circuits and hot-wires my brain all at once. I gasp, his tongue invading my mouth and giving me a taste of myself as well as him which leaves me fucking melting into the bed beneath us. He kisses just like his eye colour, stormy seas and wild winds, and I'm unable to stop my arms from wrapping around his neck, my fingers once again in his hair as I pull him closer and kiss him back with a ferocity that scares me.

Who is this person who kisses her stepbrother so wantonly? I barely recognise myself, but I don't stop. Instead, I grind my pelvis against him, fire pooling low in my stomach when he groans and pushes back, his fabric-covered dick sliding between my wet pussy lips in a way that's driving me wild.

A part of me knows that I should stop this, knows that this is wrong, but why does it feel so right then? Why does the broken part of me, the one that craves affection, desperately need them like I need the oxygen in the air? I could no more stop this than I could deny myself my art, and regardless of the wrongness, the fact I know my father would be hurt and possibly even disgusted with me, I don't want to say no. I want the twins, Cas and Prince too, even if I shouldn't.

He pulls back with a low growl, his eyes just as wild as a maelstrom.

"If Cas hadn't ordered us not to fuck you yet, I'd be balls deep inside you right fucking now, Pretty Thing." His voice is a deep rasp, there's colour on his cheeks, and every hard inch of him presses against my softness.

My eyebrows squish together, my lips parting as I try to think of a retort to the fact that Cas thinks he's got some kind of control over my body. I'm ignoring the warmth in my chest that it could be due to the fact that he cares, that he promised me they'd take care of me, that it would all be okay.

"Don't forget Prince has first fuck," Oct reminds Kit from beside us, and I tear my gaze away from Kit to look into his twin's eyes. His pupils are blown out, the bright blue almost completely swallowed up by black.

"First fuck?" I question, my voice breathy but with a sharpness to it that has both boys chuckling. My eyes narrow as I look between them, my lips pressing tightly together as my body heats for a completely different reason than having the twins in my bed.

"Oh, you're gonna give him hell, little sis, aren't you?" Oct says with a grin on his pillowy lips before leaning down and capturing my downturned mouth in a kiss. A deep groan sounds in his chest, his tongue swirling around my mouth in what I assume is a bid to capture the taste of my pussy that Kit left behind.

My annoyance is forgotten, my thoughts scattering as Oct fills me with sunshine and laughter, his kiss teasing and everything that is best about a summer's day. I keep one hand on Kit, the other gripping the back of Oct's head and pulling him closer, a small whine-like sound falling into his lips from mine when Kit starts to suck and tease my neck.

There are no more thoughts about how wrong this is, because it doesn't feel wrong. To be in between the twins feels just right, and my body is screaming to take it further, to let them bury themselves inside me so deeply that they'll never leave.

A sharp rap on the door has me jerking back and my heart thudding inside my chest. Neither boy so much as moves an inch, although both have mischievous grins on their handsome faces, no sign of the worry that courses through me. My eyes go wide when my father's voice sounds on the other side of

the door. Thank fuck he started knocking as I got older. “Little Spark? You up, honey?”

“Y–yes, Dad. I–I just woke up.” I have to swallow hard past the sudden dryness in my throat in order to get the words out, and the last of my words end on a slight gasp when Kit licks a line up the side of my neck. Fuck, these two are bloody dangerous.

“Well, when you’re ready, can you join us for breakfast? There’s a couple of things Odette and I want to discuss.” I can’t quite make out the tone of his voice, but he doesn’t sound too angry so he can’t know the guys are in here, right?

Discuss? What more is there to talk about?

“S–sure, Dad,” I answer, distracted from my thoughts and the conversation when Oct suddenly sucks my earlobe. “I–I’ll be down soon.”

“Great, Little Spark,” he says, and my body relaxes as I hear his footsteps retreating down the hall.

“Fuck,” I breathe out, trying to break through the lust haze that the twins have put me in, and are still putting me in. I take my hands off them both, my fingers immediately twitching to get back on them. “I–I think you guys should go. I need to get ready.”

They both pause, heads slightly tilted as they study me with a banked heat in their stares and suddenly I’m itching to hide as they train their eyes on me.

“As you wish, Pretty Thing,” Kit purrs, placing a soft kiss on my lips and leaving them tingling. He pushes up, the slight chill of the spring morning air hitting my feverish body as he gets out of bed and stalks towards the balcony doors. Of fucking course that’s how they got in.

“We’ll be back tonight, little sis,” Oct promises, copying his brother and kissing my lips, though he lingers longer, peppering me with small kisses until my breath is panting from my chest and my fingers are tangling in his soft hair. “Don’t bother locking the doors.”

I watch through half-lidded eyes, propped up on my elbows as he gets out of my bed and stretches, showcasing all of his glorious muscles and the fact that, like Kit, he's in just boxer briefs, a gaudy orange pair that tugs my lips upwards. *He's definitely my sunshine.* He has random tattoos decorating his body, bright bursts of colour in a patchwork that suits him in its chaos. There's a clock face on his forearm, a bird swooping low on his hip, and a teal butterfly in the centre of his chest.

He gives me the cheekiest smile known to man when I catch his eyes, then he saunters to the balcony doors, his hard-on bobbing in his underwear with each step, before going through and softly closing them behind him.

I flop back onto the sheets—the damp fucking sheets—and a huff of air leaves my lungs as I try to decide if I want to cry or giggle like a fucking schoolgirl. I want to call them back, but I have to physically grip the duvet to stop myself from reaching for them even though they're gone.

How is this my life? How did it go from trying to live my life after my mother's death to...this? I'm not even sure what this is, but I think I just agreed to let the twins back into my room tonight. I didn't tell them no...

And what did they mean by Cas ordered them not to fuck me yet? And that Prince gets first fuck? And why is a part of me okay with having my autonomy taken away by them like that? What's wrong with me that I crave this kind of attention from my stepbrothers? Am I so broken that I'll give them that power over me, that control?

My head spins as I try to decode what it all means, and I've got sweet fuck all. Add in that my dad wants to discuss something and I can feel the tension building, weighing on me like a headache. Tremors race across my body, heat making me flush as sweat beads under my arms at the memory of how far I let the twins take it this morning and how much I wanted it to go further.

My fingers twitch in the covers, and the unbidden thought of what will help to ease the pressure slams into me with such

force that I'm up and out of my bed in an instant, heading to my bathroom with a desperate need that I know won't be ignored. It's a battle that I've been losing ever since I discovered how little power I had when my pleas for my mother's life to be spared went unanswered. Cancer doesn't give a fuck.

Reaching into the back of the cabinet, I take out a small pouch, the sound of the zipper loud as I drag it across the teeth. I bite my lip, my fingers trembling a little and my heart pounding as I pull out a freshly wrapped blade. Then I take off the paper, the light gleaming off the silver surface.

My nerves jerk, yet my hand steadies as I roll up my sleeve, my eyes darting over the mixture of silver and pink scars that litter my forearm, looking for a new place. The logical part of my brain tells me this isn't the way to deal with my overwhelming emotions, but logic has nothing to do with what I crave, the control that I need to take back.

"Just four cuts," I murmur, pausing when I realise the sudden significance of the number. "One for each of them."

The rush as the blade slices across my skin rivals that of the release Kit just gave me, and my eyes flutter closed for a second as I let the feeling wash over me, bringing peace in its wake. All the tension drains from my body like the drops of blood that drip from it, and tears sting my eyes at the sheer relief, leaving me breathless.

Opening my eyes, I repeat the move three more times, my muscles relaxing further with each slice, and the beauty of the crimson blood that drips down my olive skin—the same tanned hue as my mother's—captivates me for a moment. I know that hot shame will fill me later, that I will continue to cover my scars with long sleeves, but for now, I will focus on the way the small pain is allowing me to breathe easier and helping me to focus my mind once again.

Wrapping the blade back in its packet and then some tissue paper, I drop it into the bin and turn on the shower, feeling like I'm floating and finally able to just fucking breathe. It may not be a healthy coping mechanism, but it's all I've got, all I've

ever had, and it works to calm me when everything feels too much.

And my new family, my new stepbrothers, definitely qualify as too much.

CHAPTER FOUR

“YOU PUT A SPELL ON ME” BY AUSTIN GIORGIO

PRINCE

We wait for Ember in the dining room, sitting down with plates piled high and still feeling jet-lagged as shit.

The twins look fresher than Cas and I, and I don't even need to guess where they were this morning, having heard Ember's cries of pleasure through the wall between our rooms.

My dick was so fucking hard picturing what they were doing to her that I came in my sheets like a horny teenager at the whimpering sounds she made. I imagined her making those sweet noises while I'm buried deep inside her, my hand wrapped around her pretty, slender throat.

Fuck. Now I'm hard again and with her dad at the table. Inappropriate doesn't even begin to cover it.

Then she walks in, shoulders back and breasts thrust forward, her long-sleeved, white shirt and high-waisted jeans clinging to every mouthwatering curve. It's not helping my dick, but I'm just as entranced as my brothers when she strides in, pausing when she sees us all staring. A flush warms her cheeks pink, and I love the colour on her.

“G-good morning,” she greets softly, her big, blue eyes wide as she tries to work out where to sit.

“We saved you a seat,” Caspian tells her, rising and gesturing to the place between him and I. The pink in her

cheeks darkens when she catches my gaze, and I know that I'm giving her a predator's smile, but I don't give a fuck. Cas might want to fool her into thinking he's a good guy, but I have no such qualms.

The way I see it, she doesn't have a choice so why sugar-coat it?

"Oh, thanks," she replies in a surprised whisper before slowly making her way to us. She pauses once more when Cas pulls out her chair, and I can see the rapid rise and fall of her chest as she lets him push it in under her.

"I got you a plate," he tells her, motioning to the very full plate of food that's in front of her. She licks her lips, blinking owlishly at it.

"I usually just have some muesli," she informs him quietly, not looking up from the plate of food, but he just smiles indulgently at her.

I lean over, placing my lips next to her ear.

"Be a good girl and eat your breakfast, Sugar. Then maybe later you'll get a treat." I fucking love the way she shivers, her hands grasping each other in her lap.

"How kind you are, Caspian," Odette coos sweetly, giving Cas a wide smile that makes my teeth clench. "Although, I agree Ember will need muesli in the future if she wants to keep her figure. Us women can't afford to eat pancakes every day." She titters, and I see Ember flush deeply, but this time I suspect she's embarrassed as she rubs a patch on her forearm and looks down at her lap.

My brows dip, a growl trapped in my throat at the clear barb in Odette's words; I don't like that she made Ember feel anything less than gorgeous, which she is. Yes, she's not rail thin like Odette, but personally, I like something to grab hold of when I'm making a woman scream my name, and my new sister is soft in all the right places.

"You're perfect, Little Cinders," Cas assures her under his breath, and I see her swallow while rubbing that patch on her

arm again. I don't like the nervous habit. "Eat a little for me, please?"

She heaves out a breath before biting her lower lip, no doubt uncomfortable that she's the centre of attention. "O-okay."

I shift in my seat and murmur an appreciative noise when she takes her first bite, envious of the fucking fork that disappears into those lush lips of hers. I can see mealtimes being a challenge from here on out.

"Little Spark, Ember, honey," Richard, Ember's dad says, and to be honest, I'd almost forgotten he was there. It pisses me off that he didn't notice Odette's cruel words to his daughter a moment ago, but then again, she's good at sinking her claws into men and getting them so obsessed with her that they don't see much else. I've seen her do it countless times over the years. Ember looks up at him, those baby blues giving him her entire focus. There's a burning feeling inside my chest when she continues to stare at her father, because I want her to focus on me and no one else. Well, I'll make a concession for my brothers, but no one but us gets to touch her. "Odette and I have been talking, and we think it's best if you stay at home and we bring in tutors from now on, just like the boys have."

The clatter of her fork hitting the plate sounds like a gunshot in the room, and my hand goes to her thigh, rubbing soothing circles on it when her mouth falls open as her breath hitches.

"What did you just say?" she questions in a trembling voice, her body quivering. "What about college? My friends?" Her face is lined with confusion, her voice a little wobbly, and my chest aches at hearing the hint of her upset. I'm all for this suggestion though, because I want her here with us. Fuck letting any other dickhead even look at her. Yet a part of me feels the need to make it right, to take away any slight pain she may feel. That reaction is...unexpected.

"Well, you'll have the boys, and I'm sure you can still see your friends from time to time," Odette adds dismissively, tilting her head to the side as she studies Ember like a snake

might a little mouse. She pauses in cutting up her sliced avocado while Richard nods, who turns to stare at Odette with such adoration it makes me feel queasy. She doesn't deserve it, not by a long shot. "And having one-on-one tuition is the best type of education. You want the best education, don't you, Ember?"

Odette's tone leaves me feeling uneasy. She's spoken to us like that, like we're being so unreasonable for wanting something other than what she has decided. Like we're stupid. My palm tightens on Ember's leg, and I only ease up when she inhales a sharp breath. I'm not sure whether it was my tight grip or Odette's words, but either way, I don't like Odette talking to my darlin' like that, and I don't want to cause her pain, so I loosen my grip.

"O—of course I do, but I've only just started my final year. Isn't this a bit disruptive? And you know I wanted to go to Goldsmiths, so I can't afford to let things slip." She misses the pinch of Odette's brows because she's too busy looking at her dad, her dark brows lowered over her sparkling eyes. The guys and I don't though, all of us stiffening in our seats. We know what it's like to be on the sharp end of her temper, and it ain't pretty. My heart thuds hard inside my chest as I shift in my seat, torn between protecting Ember from Odette and terrified of making her more of a target. If Odette knows how obsessed any of us are over our stepsister, she'll make no bones about using Ember against us.

"Well, it's a good thing that your father secured you an alumnus from Goldsmiths as your art tutor, isn't it?" Her condescending tone leaves a sour taste in my mouth, and I can see how the others all look at Odette with a weariness born from years of having that tone directed at us. Ember won't win this, not now that Odette has made a decision.

"That's amazing, really, but I just think we need to discuss this a bit more. It's a huge upheaval, and I enjoy college life. I've been doing really well in my classes and—"

"Enough!" Richard barks before slamming his hands down on the table, and Ember jumps, her hands flying to her chest as a gasp falls from her lips. My nostrils flare as I glare at her

dad, my teeth grinding at the audacity of him speaking to her like that. I don't give a fuck if he's her dad, no one gets to make her flinch like a kicked puppy. I go to open my mouth and tell him to calm the fuck down, damn the consequences with Odette, but he speaks once more before I can utter a word. "Ember, it's been decided, and that's the end of it. You'll be staying at home to continue your education." Ember's shoulders slump when she gives in, though the tension in her muscles and her pinched lips tell me she's pissed. Suddenly, I don't want her to let them win. I want her fire. I can see it simmering just below the surface, and I want it to burn us all.

"W-when do I leave?" she asks quietly, and a knot forms at the back of my jaw at the sound of defeat in her voice.

I fucking hate it, and I loathe being stuck in between a rock and a hard place. If I intervene, it may just make things worse for her with Odette. Perhaps not right away, but Odette is a conniving, manipulating bitch who'll store the information that I'll jump to Ember's defense away, wielding it like a honed blade to deliver a devastating blow at the time of her choosing. My stomach hardens as I sit there, doing nothing, just like I always have done.

"Your tutors will start on Monday, same as the boys, so you have the weekend to relax and to get to know each other better." I move my hand up higher on her thigh, watching the way her breath hitches when my fingers brush just below the apex of her thighs. Maybe I can get that fire some other way, distract her a little. "You'll share some sessions with Christopher and Octavius, and you'll all take riding lessons together in Hyde Park. Trust me, Ember, this is for the best." Odette, clearly finished, goes back to her coffee and sliced avocado while talking with Richard.

"It's not all bad, Sugar," I whisper, inhaling her scent of lavender and rosemary. I love the sharp perfume and want to coat myself in it, in her. "This way, we'll get to spend more time together, discover everything about each other." My fingers coast higher, and her chest rises and falls rapidly as her cheeks brighten.

“I thought you knew everything about me, Prince?” she questions in a sassy tone, tipping her head towards me, and fuck, her eyes are like the purest sapphires, drowning me in their brilliance. The hint of fire is back, and my chest warms knowing I had something to do with relighting it. Then her words and brattiness register and I find I like it, my lips splitting into a wide grin. I like it a lot.

“Oh, I know almost everything,” I say, inching my fingers up higher until I’m stroking over her jeans-clad pussy. I bite my bottom lip at how warm she feels and how wet I know she is underneath those pants. “But there is always more to find out, don’t you think?”

Her eyelids flutter when I apply pressure just over her clit, her hands clenching the edge of the table, but I don’t let up, seeing how far I can take her. I’ve learned to read a woman and her reactions like a book, and the sweat that breaks out on her brows tells me she’s close.

“Ember?” her father queries, back to the doting-sounding man that we’ve all come to know. Fucking Odette gets her claws in quick, moulding the men she finds so that they suit her needs. Ember jerks so suddenly, the plates rattle.

“Y–yes, Dad?” Her eyes remain on the table in front of her, and the blind fool doesn’t even fucking notice.

“Odette and I have plans today and won’t be back until later tonight. Why don’t you give the boys a tour of London, if you’re all not too jet-lagged?” He looks around at us, completely oblivious to where I am touching his daughter. I like Richard, he seems like an okay dad, but what a fucking fool. He’s completely clueless, especially where his daughter is concerned, and has been for years if our research on their relationship is sound, which it is because Oct knows what he’s doing. Luckily, she has us to take care of her now.

“I’m sure we’ll manage, especially if Ember is there to take care of us,” Kit answers, and I know his words are nowhere near as innocent as they sound, his eyes travelling up Ember’s torso before pausing on her luscious tits.

Fuck, I love the way her cheeks colour when we say shit like that. My cock jumps in my pants at the sight of her all flushed and needy. I press a little harder against the seam of her jeans again, and she coughs before drawing both lips between her teeth, her fingers gripping the table so hard that her knuckles turn white. She doesn't push me off though, which in itself is very telling. She wants me, wants us, even if she's trying to fight it. She'll give in. She has no choice after all. She belonged to us six months ago. As soon as Odette told us about her, she was ours.

“Splendid!” Richard beams, still completely fucking oblivious, clearly too focused on his new bride. “That’s settled then. Take Davis,” he instructs, then takes out his phone, his thumbs flying across the screen. “And I have topped your account up, so just have fun and don’t worry about anything, okay, Little Spark?”

She lets out a slow breath, her hand finally coming to grab mine as she tries to push me away. I do like her fight. It’s cute that she thinks she can control what I do to her. We’ll teach her she has no control real soon.

“Okay, Dad.” She won’t look at him, her attention on her still mostly full plate of food. He doesn’t notice though as he turns back to Odette, dismissing his daughter and her pain like the fucking fool that he is.

I let her tug my fingers away from her core, but quickly flip my hand so that my fingers tangle with hers. A zap of electricity lights up my arm, and I catch her wide eyes as she looks back up at me. This effect she has on me, while wholly unexpected, isn’t unpleasant.

“Best finish your breakfast, Sugar,” I instruct her quietly, rubbing her knuckles with my thumb and liking the feel of holding her hand in mine. It’s so small, just like she is. “Looks like we’ve got a busy day.”

“WAR OF HEARTS - ACOUSTIC VERSION” BY RUELLE

EMBER

As instructed, we take Davis—our driver—and the Bentley, which is a seven-seater so it can fit all of us, and head into the centre of London. The boys all jostle to be either side of me, but Prince and Cas win when they point out that the twins had me to themselves this morning. My cheeks must be flashing neon red because I had no fucking idea that it was common knowledge that they were in my bed.

I’m still furious about my dad pulling me from college, my shoulders tense with the injustice of it. Yes, I might not have lots of friends there, I’ve mostly kept to myself the past few years, but it was still something that was mine, something that I enjoyed doing every day. Not to mention it got me out of that mausoleum of a house, though I suppose it won’t feel so empty now that the guys are there too.

Either way, he should have consulted it with me because I’ve been basically raising myself since Mum died. He’s not been there to have a say and certainly hasn’t earned any kind of right to say what I can and can’t do. My jaw clenches, frustration at my inability to just say all of that to him giving me the start of a headache. It’s been this way for the past couple of years, the more he withdrew from me, the more I couldn’t speak my mind, some part of me fearful that if I did, he’d leave entirely.

I settle in my seat when a flare of pain in my heart has me rubbing my chest as I remember the way he shouted at me, completely railroading me. He really isn’t the man I used to know and admire. Is that because of Odette? Was he really like this before he met Mum? Or is this the man he’s become and I just didn’t see it? I guess given the distance that’s now between us, how would I know the sort of man he is?

“Where to, Miss Everly?” Davis asks, interrupting my pity party. His eyes dart to mine in the rearview mirror. He’s around my father’s age, early fifties, and is handsome in a

silver fox kind of way. He's been with us for the past couple of years since Dad decided we needed a full-time driver—in part, I think because he's too worried something will happen to me if I learn to drive myself. I would have liked the option, but I never wanted to make an issue out of it. I always wanted to keep the peace, yet look where that got me. Now I have a new stepmother and four stepbrothers that I had no fucking clue about until yesterday. I clearly matter so little to Dad that I don't need to be involved in anything to do with our family.

I take a deep inhale, deciding that I need to step out of the huff, otherwise, I'll just spiral into a pit of despair, and I promised myself I wouldn't go back there.

“We'd like to see the sights, so um, maybe Trafalgar Square?” A rush of genuine excitement enters my veins when I think about going to the National Gallery and showing them some of the wonderful artwork inside. It's one of my favourite places in London. I love all the museums, but the beautiful art that's housed at the National always calms my soul. I've spent many an afternoon getting lost in its galleries, letting my mind just absorb the beauty around me and forget all the pain and heartache.

“Of course, Miss,” Davis replies, and then the privacy screen comes up between us and him, leaving me with my new stepbrothers.

“What has you smiling so beautifully, Little Cinders?” Cas questions in a husky voice as we pull onto the main road. An involuntary shiver runs down my spine at the sound. Shit, I am so fucked when it comes to these guys.

“Why do you call me that?” I counter, twisting around to look into his beautiful, copper eyes, which sparkle in the light when the spring sunshine hits his face every so often. I'm itching to capture them on paper, my fingers twitching with the need for my pencil and watercolours. I could even add in some metallic, just to try and capture the way they practically glow.

“I asked first,” he replies with a smirk that does terrible things to my already damp knickers thanks to Prince at

breakfast. To be fair, it was a good distraction, although a part of me is pissed that he stole some of my crossness, even if I was never going to win that battle. I take in a sharp breath when Cas reaches out and tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear, his touch sending pulses all the way down to my needy core.

“I thought maybe we could go to the National Gallery, and I’ll show you some of my favourite paintings, if you like?” I’m useless to resist his commands when he touches me. Now that the words have left my mouth I feel almost shy, sucking my lower lip under my teeth and nibbling it. He *tuts*, his thumb pulling my lip out and lingering for a moment before he pulls it away.

“That sounds perfect, Little Cinders,” he says, his lips quirking up in a half smile, and I can’t help mine doing the same. “And I call you that because you remind me of Cinderella with your long, blonde hair and big, sad, blue eyes.”

My brows dip when he says the last bit, not wanting to believe that he can see more than I’m willing to show to the world. “I have sad eyes?” I have to swallow past the lump in my throat as his face softens and he palms my cheek. For a moment, for a single space in time, I forget that he’s my stepbrother, and I lean into the touch, my breath easing out of me in a sigh of pure bliss. Cas calms me in a way that I’ve never experienced before, and I’m quickly becoming addicted to the feeling. The body wants what it wants, even if the mind knows it’s wrong.

“There’s a world of pain in those blue depths of yours, Little Cinders, like your heart has been broken and you’re not sure how to put back the pieces.”

How does he see me so clearly? How does he look into my eyes and understand the pain I’m going through from my mother dying and my father pulling away to lose himself in business and a new family, as if it’s plain for all to see?

Tears sting my eyes and he lets out a deep sigh before he tugs me closer until our foreheads touch. It feels so intimate

and leaves me taking a trembling breath that fans across his lips. I close my eyes and tears spill down my cheeks in a warm river, but I don't wipe them away. I can't move as I breathe him in, his tart, toffee apple scent a balm that I need more of.

"Like recognizes like, Little Cinders. We share the same pain of losing a loved one, we all do. Your sorrow is ours and ours is yours. It's what connects us, Ember."

My hands come up, fisting his soft jumper, and a small sob falls from my lips. Then I open my eyes and I'm drowning in his copper orbs.

"W—who did you lose?"

He takes a shuddering inhale, and the sound is so raw that it breaks my already fractured heart a bit more. "My mom had a miscarriage when I was nine and she fell into a deep depression. She couldn't get over the loss. One day, we couldn't wake her up because she'd OD'd on sleeping pills." A soft noise escapes my throat, my hands tightening in his jumper until my fingers go numb. "Dad wasn't able to cope, all alone with an angry and hurting nine-year-old boy. He jumped off Manhattan Bridge two months later. Odette had been a family friend for a while, trying to help Dad, and then took me in when I became an orphan."

"No—" My gasp ends on a muffle as I pull him closer to me, burying my face in his neck and sobbing against his skin. "Cas, I—" My chest tightens at the memory of what I'd done earlier, the way I'd cut myself. I'd never go that far, to take my own life. Well, not anymore anyway.

"Shhhh, baby. It's in the past now, and I never would have met these guys or you if it hadn't happened, so it's not all bad." He pulls me even closer, rubbing my back to soothe me when I should be the one comforting him. I soak in his embrace for a few moments before I drag myself away from him.

"Shit, Cas, I should be comforting you, not the other way round," I say, my voice thick.

“Don’t apologize for being sad for me. I don’t think anyone has ever cried for me before,” he tells me softly, a look of wonder on his face as he brushes one of my tears away. The crack he’s unwittingly caused in my heart grows bigger, filling with all things Cas. “I’m sorry I stole your smile, Little Cinders. I don’t like to see you cry.”

Warmth presses against my back, the smell of rum, leather, and cedar surrounding me as Prince wraps his arms around me and pulls me back so that I’m flush against his front. My arms stretch, my fingers still gripping Cas’s jumper, and his copper eyes burn with a need that leaves me weak-kneed as they look at me and Prince.

“I only ever want to see you cry when you’re begging me to stop, and you will beg, Sugar,” he purrs in my ear, and it’s as if my body flashes with heat, burning away the sadness from moments before. He’s good at distraction it seems, but perhaps he doesn’t like to see me sad either? He rubs his nose up my neck, shivers following in his wake, and I can barely catch my breath with the change from desperate sorrow to molten lust.

“Seems like you’re the one begging, Prince,” I rasp, my filter blown to smithereens, and my eyes widen at the brazenness of my comment when he pauses.

“Oh, that’s fighting talk, little sis,” Oct comments from the seats behind me, and I’m frozen, cursing myself as one of Prince’s large palms glides up my shoulder before wrapping around the front of my throat in a way that has dampness soaking my knickers.

“Is that so?” he questions, his other hand skimming down my side, slipping around the front of me and stopping just above the button of my jeans. Cas brings his hands over mine, holding them captive against him as Prince slowly undoes the button, then the zipper of my jeans. My body trembles underneath their grip, but they hold me captive, not letting me stop what I know is about to happen.

You wouldn’t stop them anyway. You like having the control taken from you.

Damn my stupid inner bitch knowing my darkest desires. I'm brought back to the present when his fingers slide inside my cotton knickers, and the thought that perhaps I should have worn lace flits through my mind before he fries all my fucking brain cells when he makes contact with my slick folds.

"Prince..." I moan, pushing my hips up in a bid to seek more friction.

"I told you that you would beg me, darlin'," he breathes in my ear, the warmth of his breath making my nipples pebble and ache for attention, the wrongness of what's happening just making me wetter. "And you proved me right in less than thirty seconds. Now, why don't you add a please to that and I'll let you come all over my fingers."

Fuck. Me.

I lick my lips, contemplating not saying a word, but I'd be kidding myself if I thought that I wasn't going to do anything other than what he commands of me.

"Please, Prince," I plead in a cracked, desperate tone, not even recognising the wanton, husky sound of my voice.

"Fuck, Little Cinders," Cas rasps as he looks down at Prince's hand between my legs.

"Good girl," Prince praises, and I just fucking melt as he begins to swirl his fingers and tease my clit. "She's so fucking wet." Three deep groans sound in the enclosed space, causing more wetness to seep from me.

"Oh, fuck, Prince," I gasp, his touch driving me crazy, all my previous sorrow forgotten as I grind against his hand, my eyelids fluttering and back arching with the pleasure that's running through me like an electric pulse.

"Take her jeans off, I need to get my fingers inside her," Prince orders in a low drawl that teases across my skin, leaving me panting and desperate.

"Lift, Cinders," Cas commands, and I comply, raising my hips. I'm unable and unwilling to stop chasing the high that is just out of reach. I need the release, and need to feel wanted

and desired, to not be dismissed, and to be worshipped like Prince is doing right now.

Cas pulls my jeans and knickers down, leaving them around my ankles. Then he pushes my thighs apart and widens my legs, and the twins groan from the back.

“Such a pretty pink pussy,” Kit purrs from next to my ear, and my head falls to land on Prince’s shoulder as I open my thighs wider, encouraging him to go lower with his hand. I roll my gaze to look at Kit and Oct in the back seat and find matching looks of lust written over their faces and lips parted as they sit forward, staring at my dripping cunt.

“Use your words, Sugar,” Prince commands before sucking and kissing my neck.

I’m going straight to hell because I don’t even think about disobeying my stepbrother, my gaze flitting to Cas’s in front of me, drowning in copper.

“Please fuck me with your fingers, Prince. Please make me come.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Cinders,” Cas rasps, and I gasp when he pulls his hard cock out of his jeans. Fucking hell, that’s a gorgeous dick. It’s thick and long, and my eyes widen when I see the glint of metal at the end.

“She just got wetter looking at your dick, Cas,” Prince informs him just as he lowers his fingers and slams two of them inside my aching cunt.

“Prince!” I cry out, so wound up that I’m coming already, wetness squirting out of me as I grip Cas’s jumper so tightly I’m surprised it doesn’t rip.

“Shit, she just squirted everywhere,” Oct moans, but I can’t concentrate on anything other than Prince’s fingers as he keeps thrusting in time to Cas pumping his dick. I come again when Cas goes rigid, his hips pitching forward and spurts of cum hit my pussy and lower stomach.

I expect Prince to pull back, but he doesn’t. Instead, he scoops it up and stuffs Cas’s cum inside me, sending shock waves throughout my entire body as he stuffs me full. As the

waves of pleasure subside, my hands drop from Cas's jumper to rest at my sides, and I slump against Prince as I bask in the glow of two epic fucking orgasms.

"Such a good fucking girl for your brothers," Oct whispers, and I roll my head to the side to see him looking at what Prince is doing, his blue eyes almost black and his pupils blown.

"She clenches around my fingers when you call her that, Oct," Prince murmurs, exposing all my dirty secrets and keeping his fingers inside me as though he wants to keep Cas's cum there. "You like it when he reminds you we're your brothers, don't you?"

I look straight into Oct's eyes, having no energy left to fight whatever it is that's going on between us. Not that I want to. "Yes."

My answer doesn't even shock me anymore. I've always liked sex, but with these guys, it's like I've never experienced anything like it before. I've had the three best orgasms of my life today, and none of them was with a dick inside me.

A thread of doubt creeps in, covering my post-orgasm glow in the murky pink of shame. My climaxes were with people whom I definitely shouldn't be sexually attracted to, they're my new brothers for fuck's sake. My family. *What the fuck am I doing?*

I must stiffen a little because Kit is suddenly there, my sweat-damp face in his palms.

"Our secret, remember?" My breathing calms as I look deep into his stormy eyes, nothing but acceptance and reassurance in their depths. "Nothing that feels this good is bad, okay?"

"O-okay." I nod like a fucking idiot, but there's something about following their lead, doing as they say, and letting them take control that puts me at ease.

It's as if I can finally let go and leave someone else in charge of my life, which is strange as I felt so out of control after Mum passed that it's all I've craved since, but I'm just so

tired. So tired of having to push myself to even get out of bed some days.

“Let us take care of you, Cinders,” Cas urges, pulling some wet wipes from somewhere and nudging Prince’s fingers from inside me. I moan as Prince withdraws while grumbling. Then I hear more than see him lick and suck his slick fingers and my breath catches. Prince is tasting mine and Cas’s releases and it’s the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever come across.

“He tastes good on you, Sugar,” he groans, bringing his fingers to my lips. I hold Cas’s stare as I open my mouth, allowing Prince to slide a long digit inside. A musky saltiness bursts on my tongue, my own flavour mixed with Cas’s, and my eyelids flutter as I greedily clean every inch of Prince’s finger, my hands holding his wrist so I can start on another.

“Fuck, I’m hard again,” Oct whines from the seats behind me, and I hear the others murmur their agreement, but if I’m doing this, I’m *fucking* doing this.

Letting go of Prince’s hand, I lean forward towards Cas, my jeans and knickers still around my ankles but I don’t give a shit. Cas looks up, and I swoop in, pressing my lips to his and sliding my tongue into his mouth when his lips part in surprise. I want to give him a taste of us too, and I’ve been wondering what those lips would feel like ever since I met him yesterday.

Fuck, was it only a little over twelve hours ago that these boys came strolling into my house, into my life? And now I’m making out with one, his cum leaking out of my pussy while the other three watch.

“I do taste good on you, Cinders,” he mumbles against my kiss-swollen lips before we part, his voice a husky purr that has my core clenching again. “But we should probably finish getting you cleaned up.”

I give him a nod, sucking my lower lip under my teeth and running my tongue along it to catch the last taste of him.

I’m in so much fucking trouble with these guys, and I’m not sure that I care.

CHAPTER FIVE

“AFTERLIFE” BY HAILEE STEINFELD

KIT

EMBER is mostly presentable by the time we reach our destination. The flush on her cheeks just makes her look so damn beautiful, it takes more effort than I possess not to grab hold of her when we leave the car. So I don't bother, earning a growl from Prince—possessive bastard—as I spin her away with me and towards the monument.

“So this is Trafalgar Square, huh, Pretty Thing?” I coo in her ear as I tuck her under my arm. I fucking love that she doesn't hesitate to wrap her arm around my waist. After all, no one knows us here. Oct snags her other hand, and I know the others are close behind us as we stare up at the tall building.

“The one and only,” she answers in that soft voice of hers. I pull her closer, letting the warm, spring sun shine down on us. I don't think I'll ever get over holding her after waiting for what felt like an eternity to meet her.

When Odette said we'd have a new stepsister, a plaything for us for being such dutiful stepsons, Oct and I thought we'd quickly break her with everything that we've craved to do after all these years. Though, after this morning, after she came on my face, filling my mouth with her pleasure, and then kissed me...fuck. Something clicked into place, and catching Oct's eye, I knew the same was true for him.

We still want to play with her, shit, we still want to break her, but for the first time in my life, I want to put her back together again. To remake her and then bask in her fucking glory. She's exquisite, so goddamn beautiful that it almost hurts to look at her, and there's something about her soul that's so pure and shines so bright. I'm drawn to her like a moth to a fucking flame and I don't give a shit if my wings get burned.

And she wants us. Hell, she cried for Cas and he was right when he said no one has ever cried for him before, for any of us. I want to tell her our sorry tale just to see if she cares enough to shed a tear like she did for him. Something tells me she would, and fuck if it doesn't make my soul crave her tears just to know someone cares.

"Would you like to see the gallery?" she asks eagerly, and my chest warms at the excitement in her tone. I look down at her, my breath catching at her stunning features. She's perfection.

"I wouldn't want to do anything else, Pretty Thing," I reply, and her cheeks flush a deeper pink at the compliment, so I resolve to use the nickname and flatter her every chance I get from now on. "Show us your favorites first."

Her blue eyes fucking sparkle, and I can't help it, I swoop down and place a kiss on her plush lips, her grip tightening around me, Oct clearly letting her hand go as it comes to rest right over my black heart that I'm wondering if she owns now, the other clutched tightly in my grip. Our eyes close and I get the faint hint of Cas's musk, and fuck if that doesn't make my dick hard again. When Cas whipped his cock out in the car, Oct and I followed suit, and watching her fall apart was the hottest fucking thing I think I've ever seen in my life.

Reluctantly, I pull away, her lids fluttering open before locking her stunning eyes on me again.

"What was that for?" she asks, her voice low and husky, and fucking hell, the sound makes me even harder.

"For being you, Pretty Thing," I say, placing a light kiss on her nose because I just can't help it. "Lead the way." I sweep

my arm out, instructing her to take us in the direction of the gallery.

She blinks twice, her eyes unfocused, and it's too fucking adorable. I love the way I can affect her so much that she loses herself when I touch her. Then she takes a deep inhale and heads towards the massive columned building that seems to be pretty busy with people coming and going, pulling me along with her.

“You all have different accents,” she comments, and I smile as I see the dip in between her brows. “Are you not from the same place?”

“Nah, we didn't grow up together. Well, not really,” I tell her, stepping into the cool interior of the building. The outside is fucking magnificent with towering stone columns, but the moment we step foot inside, a shiver works its way up my spine. Red marble columns hold up the impressive, painted ceiling and glass dome, and huge wooden doors lead into the galleries at the top of more steps. Shit, it's pretty old, and there's a feeling about it, like the building itself has its own presence and is weighing us as we step through its doors. I think I would like to study architecture, perhaps now we can follow our own interests rather than— I stop my train of thought, not wanting to think of anything bad today. Not with the sun on my arm.

“What do you mean? Where are you all from and how did you meet?”

“Curious, ain't ya?” Oct teases, and she blushes, but he just brings her hand up to his lips and kisses her knuckles to let her know that he's not serious.

“Oct and I are from California,” I tell her as we stroll through the crowds. “We were the last to join the crew.”

“Join the crew?” She has the cutest fucking frown on her face, and I want to kiss it away, but if I do, I just won't stop, and I want to get our story out. I need to tell her about us.

“Well, Prince was the first, then Caspian was adopted when he was nine, and Odette married our dad when we were

eleven.” I can see the puzzled frown tugging her brows down and I know her next question before she even asks it. “Our mom died when we were young. I don’t really remember much about her, but apparently, she got sick and it was all over quickly.”

Her gasp pulls our little group up short, her steps faltering and her hand clenching around mine as she turns to face me. Oct, Prince, and Cas surround us so that the crowd parts like a river parts for a boulder.

“M—my mum died of cancer five years ago,” she tells us, her blue eyes already swimming, and it’s fascinating to watch such emotion fill someone so completely. I’ve forgotten what it’s like to feel something so keenly, it was just easier to switch it all off after Dad died, and with the shit we’ve had to do the past few years, being numb made that easier for all of us. The centre of my chest pulses with an unfamiliar ache, enough that I want to rub it away, but I resist the urge, completely captivated by our stepsister in her pain.

“I’m sorry, Pretty Thing,” I murmur, surprised to find that I am sorry for her. We knew about her mom, but hearing it from her lips and seeing her pain in the flesh hurts me deep in my soul. For years, it’s felt like I have been numb, going through the motions but not feeling much of anything, and yet, here she is, making me almost burst with emotions that I thought were long buried. I don’t like her heartache. In fact, I fucking hate it.

“What happened to your dad?”

At her question, the ache in my chest grows, a flash of pain burning hot and bright enough to steal my breath for a moment. My jaw clenches hard, my vision blurring as memories of that time try to resurface and break free from the box that I keep them in.

“He was coming to collect us from a friend’s party,” Oct interjects next to us, and his eyes have a redness to them, as they always do when he talks about that night. “It was stormy, and we’d begged him to use the Camaro earlier to come and get us.” Another sharp sting in my chest has my teeth grinding.

It's all our fault. “And the brakes failed or some shit because he came off the road and wrapped the car around a tree. He didn't make it.” Oct's shoulders are slumped, the last words barely a whisper over the loud crowds that are here at the gallery.

Despite that, Ember hears him alright, and I watch as the tears track down her cheeks. Fucking hell, to have someone cry over me, to feel my pain as if it were theirs is unlike anything I've ever known. How the hell did Cas let her go earlier?

“It's okay, Pretty Thing,” I assure her in a hushed whisper before reaching out and cupping her cheek with my free hand. Then I rub my thumb across the smooth surface, feeling the track of her tears carving a path down her skin. “It was five and a half years ago.”

I know by the sorrow in her eyes that she realises just how similar we all are and how much we have in common.

“But it still hurts you, like it hurts me.”

I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest so hard that I wonder if the whole fucking gallery can hear it.

She knows. She sees me, and I'm not sure how to feel about that. My knees feel weak, my chest tight, as I look at this young woman, barely eighteen, and marvel at how she got so fucking wise.

“Yes.” That's all I can say. It's a small confession that hurts with the force of a punch to the gut. I watch as another tear trails down her pale cheek, glinting in the gallery's low light. She nuzzles into my palm, then steps closer, resting her face on my chest and releasing Oct as her arms come around me in a comforting embrace. Oct comes closer too, burying his face against her neck and inhaling deeply.

“I'm so sorry, Kit, Oct,” she breathes out, and I pull her closer, absorbing her fucking light like I can't get enough.

“See, they made us for each other, little sis,” Oct tells her, and I couldn't agree more. She knows our agony and feels our pain like no one else.

She shivers as we press her between us all, Prince and Cas also moving closer until we're in our own bubble and each touching her. I look up, catching each of their eyes and they all give me a nod.

We're keeping her. She belongs to us now whether or not she wants to be. She's more than just a toy to be tossed aside when we grow bored. She's ours and no fucking one will take her from us.

"HAIL MARY" BY SKOTT

EMBER

How can my heart feel heavy yet lighter than it has in years?

These boys, my new stepbrothers, understand me on a level that no one else ever has before, and although I've not heard Prince's story yet, I can see in his green eyes that it's as devastating as the others. As all of ours. We've each lost a parent, or in the twins' and Cas's case, both parents, and that's something that rocks our very foundation.

"Will you show us your favorite paintings?" Oct asks softly from next to me, and my cheeks heat knowing that we've just been standing in the middle of the National fucking Gallery, hugging and seeking solace from each other as if we were alone and not surrounded by people.

"I'd love to," I reply to Oct while looking up at Kit, my voice only a little thick from the sorrow that seems to surround us. Before I second-guess myself, I press my lips against his, tasting the salt of my tears as he kisses me back.

Kissing Kit is like coming home and finding everything changed. It leaves my head spinning and my pulse racing but not necessarily in a bad way. We part after several moments, only for Oct to spin me around and plant his lips on mine.

I melt into him, because what else can I do when he kisses me like I'm the oxygen he needs to breathe? He's like a fairground ride, terrifying yet exhilarating, and my hands clutch his jumper as he deepens our kiss, giving no shits that we're in public.

Just as quickly as he started, he pulls back, his eyes alight with mischief.

"I needed another taste after this morning," he tells me with a wink before taking my hand and stepping to the side. My heart thuds in my chest, my stomach dipping at his words. To be wanted so fiercely is a confidence boost like no other.

Suddenly, Prince is there, and my eyes dart to his lips, wondering what it would be like to kiss him. He's the only one I haven't tasted yet, and my body leans towards him in an unspoken plea. He gives me a smirk, a devilish expression that destroys my already damp knickers.

I watch, barely breathing as his hand comes out and wraps around the front of my throat before he steps closer. It's a soft touch, his thumb stroking my racing pulse and his eyes tracking over my lips. He's teasing me with the knowledge that he could cut off my air supply if he wanted, and the crazy thing is, I would let him, even in the middle of the foyer of the National Gallery.

My tongue comes out to trace my lips, an obvious invitation, and heat flares through me when his green eyes become the colour of emeralds; dark and sparkling.

I shut my eyes when he leans in close, waiting for his lips to land on mine.

"When I kiss you for the first time, Sugar, my thick cock will be buried so deep inside you that you'll feel me for the rest of your life."

My heart fucking stops, but a second later, cold air hits me like a slap to the face and my lids blink open to see him standing a few feet away, his gaze locked on me and that damn smirk on his pillowy lips. Fucking bastard.

“Ready, Cinders?” Cas asks, a slight note of teasing in his tone. I narrow my eyes at him in a glare and he laughs, the sound making butterflies swarm in my stomach. “Don’t be salty,” he says, taking Prince’s place and darting in to press a quick kiss to my lips. “And he’s not lying. Prince likes to fuck hard and deep and he’s got the weapon to back up his promises.”

My eyes widen, my mouth dropping open at his words.

“How do you know that?” The question blurts out before I can stop it, but something tells me I can guess the answer.

“We told you, we’re family, and family takes care of each other.”

Oh, my motherfucking god.

My brain just shuts the fuck down, lust roaring through me at the thought that they know each other in that way. I stand frozen in the middle of the National Gallery and try not to melt into a puddle on the polished, marble floor. Why is the idea of them together, tangled limbs, so fucking hot?

“Come on, little sis. Show us those paintings,” Oct urges, his voice full of laughter as I try to reboot all my systems, and his hand slides into mine, his palm warm and enough to get my brain semi-functional again.

He pulls me towards one of the galleries, Kit holding my other hand. I try to ignore the slightly shocked expressions on some of the people around us, having clearly caught the kisses and possibly Oct’s nickname for me. It mostly works, though I can feel their curious stares like an itch across my skin.

“Mummy, I thought you said we can’t marry our brothers?” a little girl asks as we pass, and my cheeks flare, my entire body going blistering hot.

Fuck my life.

CHAPTER SIX

“GODS AND MONSTERS” BY LANA DEL RAY

EMBER

We spend the rest of the morning strolling through the galleries, and I point out all of my favourite pieces. They all seem interested, especially Kit who turns out has a keen eye for art and architecture.

We stop for lunch at the Hard Rock Cafe, which the guys declare is their new favourite place to eat after enjoying the rock-inspired vibe and the yummy American-style food. Afterwards, I take them to see the sights of London, a whirlwind tour of all the major buildings, and by the afternoon, even I'm flagging. It was an amazing day though, being able to just be with the guys and not have to worry that someone will know we shouldn't be acting so close. We even managed to keep ourselves in check, enjoying each others' company as we gazed upon iconic buildings that make up my hometown.

The twins snag the seat either side of me for the drive back, and the movement of the car soon lulls me to sleep, my head drifting to Oct's shoulder.

“We're home, little sis,” he murmurs what feels like minutes later, and I blink, trying to focus my blurry vision. The sun is setting and the car is indeed pulled up outside of our front door.

“Maybe I should call you Sleeping Beauty,” Cas teases from behind me as the door opens and a blast of fresh spring air hits me in the face, waking me up.

“What’s the time?” I ask, my voice thick, and I swallow against the dryness in my mouth. *Shit, what if I snored? Or dribbled on Oct?* I glance to the side to check, not seeing any obvious wet patch on his shoulder, then let out a slow breath, aware of their eyes on me.

“It’s about five-thirty, I think,” Kit says, getting out of the car and holding his hand out for me. “Maybe an early dinner and then bed?”

Heat pools in my core when his storm-filled eyes look me over as he helps me out of the car. My fingers grip his tightly and he pulls me close, his scent enveloping me until it’s all I can smell. I sink into him, knowing that my dad and Odette are still out.

“Sounds good,” I reply, the rest of my tiredness disappearing as lust fills my veins, and I wonder who the fuck this brazen girl is. I know he had a double meaning, that he was hinting at the promise he and Oct made to me this morning, and rather than shy away like I know I should, like my mind tells me I should, I’m agreeing. Heat radiates through my chest, my limbs feeling light as I sink into the feeling of someone else taking over the reins of my life while I’m allowed to finally be myself.

“Sounds more than good, little sis,” Oct whispers in my ear, and a shiver has my nipples pebbling and goosebumps covering my skin.

“Come on, you two, let’s get Cinders inside and then we can see what happens later,” Cas says, ever looking out for me, and he pulls me from the twins towards the house. “Odette texted, she and your dad won’t be back ‘til late, so it’s just us tonight.”

Oh god, my mind goes in all the wrong directions after he says that, dinner utterly forgotten as I imagine all the other things we could get up to. Seems like my new stepbrothers

have turned me into a horny mess, and the worst part? I don't even care.

I vowed to myself this year that I'd start living, that I'd embrace whatever life throws at me, and stop letting the death of my mother colour everything in shades of sadness. I wonder what she'd think of me and the guys. I think maybe she would've been happy, maybe even proud regardless of the taboo nature of the things that have happened between me and the guys so far.

She always used to tell me that life won't wait around and that the only thing you can do is live. Plus, she was a massive hippy, and I think she'd subscribe wholeheartedly to the whole love is love thing.

"I could make something to eat, if you'd like?" I suggest to them as we enter the dark house and I lead them down the hallway towards the kitchen.

"You can cook?" Cas teases, his brows raised, and I huff out a laugh.

"What? Because I live in this big house there's no way I know how to cook?" I question, pausing in the doorway to the kitchen, hand on my hip as he continues to clasp my other in his warm palm. "I'll have you know, Cas I-don't-know-your-last-name, that I make a mean omelette," I tell him, flicking the light switch on.

"Scott. Caspian Rudy Scott and I'm from New York. My favorite food is pizza or pasta and my favorite color is red." I giggle as he spins me, pulling me into his body in a way that has mine lighting up and leaving me breathless. "I love walking in Central Park, any Park or green space really, and I play the guitar."

I squeal as I'm torn from his embrace, and Oct is suddenly there standing in front of me. "Octavius Dante Johnson and, as you know, I'm from the sunshine coast itself. I love walks on the beach, surfing, ice cream, and playing video games."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance." I tease, my smile wide as he grins boyishly back at me.

There's a warmth at my back and Oct turns me slowly until Kit is in front of me.

"Christopher—much prefer Kit—Adam Johnson, also from California. I like history, and discovering where we came from and who walked the earth before us fascinates me. I also enjoy going to the beach, sailing, and watching sunsets with pretty girls." He swipes a piece of my hair behind my ear, and I feel the heat of a blush staining my cheeks.

Then I'm tugged from between the twins and Prince is standing in front of me. He's the most mysterious to me since I barely know a thing about him, and I'm desperate for any scraps he gives me.

"Prince—I will never tell you my real name—Marshall Brown." He yanks my hand again and I land against his chest, my palm splayed across the soft, cashmere jumper he's wearing. My heart thuds loudly in my chest, anticipation leaving me giddy and breathless. "I enjoy getting new ink and giving people tattoos." My eyes widen at his words, my mouth parting in delighted surprise. He's an artist too? "That's right, Sugar, I can draw too. I gave these assholes all their ink." He smirks and the others chuckle. "And I'll happily give you some, *if* you're a good girl for me." I take in a sharp breath, his jewel-like eyes roving over my face, drinking me in. "But I'll choose the design."

My spine snaps straight then, my lids lowering in a glare.

"It's my body, Prince. If I want a tattoo, I'll be the one to choose the design." His nostrils flare and then his lips tilt up into a grin that shouldn't be attractive but somehow is.

"Oh, darlin'," he purrs, one hand coming up and lightly circling my throat, effectively scattering any brain cells I own to the four winds. "It may be your body, but it belongs to me, to us, so what happens to it is our choice." I shouldn't be turned on right now. He's just taken my autonomy away. I should rage and be spitting mad, but the anger just won't come. I feel myself relax in his hold, my body sinking into him, and his smirk turns into a wolfish grin that leaves my core clenching. "Exactly so. Now let's see if we can't rustle up

something a little more exciting than an omelette for our girl, shall we?"

Our girl.

I can't even register that he's being offensive about my cooking skills. He called me their girl, and on top of all the other things they've said, the way they've claimed me so quickly, I'm starting to believe that maybe I do belong to them.

Does that mean they belong to me? That I own them back?

"MOONLIGHT" BY CHASE ATLANTIC

OCT

"Hey, stop thinking so hard, little sis," I chide Ember as the others get to work on making our dinner. I've never been much of a cook, but Prince is a fucking genius in the kitchen, and Kit and Cas enjoy helping, so I'll keep our girl entertained.

Our girl. I like the sound of it. I like having something that truly belongs to us, even if she was a gift from Odette, the wicked bitch from the west.

"It's just, I only met you guys a little over twenty-four hours ago and now..." she trails off, and I take her hands in mine, rubbing her knuckles. I love touching her, can't get enough of it.

"And now?" I prompt, finding that I'm curious about where her mind is at. I want to know everything about her, all of her secrets and fears, her hopes and dreams...I want it all. I want to know Ember better than I know myself, I need to know what makes her tick. I'm not sure if it's just curiosity, or

something deeper, a more primal need that won't quieten until she's in every fibre of my being.

She doesn't know everything about you... a small voice in the back of my mind reminds me, a flash of guilt making my stomach churn, but all of that's behind us now. All that shit is best left in the past.

She huffs a breath and glances at the others, who have paused in whatever it is they're doing to look over at us, then she turns back to me. "And now it's like we've known each other all our lives."

My heart stutters in my chest because she's just described exactly what I'm feeling. It's so comfortable with her and it takes no effort to be around her. She slots in as if she's been with us forever. I mean, we had a head start, knowing about her six months ago and being able to stalk her a little.

"We were just waiting for each other, baby," I tell her, using my grip on her soft hands to draw her closer until our bodies touch. Then I release her hands and her arms immediately come around me, wrapping me in an embrace that has every atom of my being singing.

"You can't say stuff like that, Oct." She sighs but snuggles closer to me and my body heats at her contact, my dick twitching in my jeans.

"Why not? It's the truth," I reply, brushing my lips across the top of her head and breathing her in deeply. She smells of lavender and rosemary, of something that I've not dared to hope for in such a long time; home.

"And what happens when you leave? Or when my dad and Odette catch us?" Her body is stiff, her hands fisting the back of my jumper, and her rapid breathing speaks of a panic that stirs inside my chest when I think of anything happening to her to take her away from us. I pull away slightly, just enough to look at her perfect face and frame it with my hands.

"Look at me, Ember," I command, my tone brokering no other option. My cock fills when she obeys immediately and without question, keeping her arms around me but pulling

back enough to tip her face towards me. “We are not going anywhere, we’re family now and that shit’s for life,” I tell her, earning a small smile even though her brows are deeply furrowed. “And as for the other stuff, don’t worry about it. We’re not letting you go.”

She nibbles her lower lip in a way that makes me want to do the same, her eyes flicking between mine. “How can you be so sure, Oct? It’s been, like, a day. We’re practically strangers.”

“I’ve known you for months,” I inform her, my voice firm as I hold her suddenly wide stare. “I know about the time you snorted a wasp up your nose at age seven. I know that your favorite color has been yellow since you were little and that you like to sleep with the curtains open so you can wake up with the dawn.” Her eyes are even wider now, her lips parted, and it takes some effort not getting lost in her blue depths. “It may feel like only twenty-four hours to you, but it’s been fucking months of waiting for us, and to have you finally here, finally in front of us...fuck, Ember.”

I press my lips against hers, needing to taste her more than I need my next breath. Everything I said is true. Odette told us about her months ago when she first started seeing Richard, and we’ve been obsessed with her ever since, trying to find out everything we can about her. We’ve the resources and I’ve the hacking skills to discover all of her skeletons. All of her secrets. Well, the painting was a nice surprise, and hearing the way she spoke in the gallery about her mom, it damn near broke me, even though we’d all read up on how she was with her the entire time she was sick, never leaving her side.

I deepen the kiss, basking in how she melts for me. Her mind may only think she’s known us for less than a day, but her body knows who it belongs to.

“You know you sound like a stalker, right?” she asks when I pull away, her voice breathless, and I’m seconds away from saying fuck it, hoisting her up on the table and eating her for dinner. The noise around us resumes, the others continuing to prepare dinner.

“Oh, baby,” I say, deciding she needs to eat some real food more than I need to eat her pussy. So I pull her towards the island where the others are setting out steaming bowls. “A stalker has nothing on the depths we went to.” She swallows hard and blinks quickly, then those bright diamond eyes become dull, her expression going slack. “What just made you sad, little sis?” All noise stops, the others snapping their attention over to us once more as I pull her to a stop.

“It’s just,” she murmurs, pausing to take a breath. “I just don’t understand why you all knew about me but I knew nothing, not even that Dad was dating Odette, let alone it was serious enough for them to get married.”

My brows lower, the knowledge that Odette planned it this way, ensuring there were no hiccups to getting the ring on her finger, weighing heavily on me. “I don’t know, baby, but sometimes it’s best not to dwell on the past and keep moving forward.”

I give her a peck on the temple, breathing in her addictive scent, then help her onto the stool in front of one bowl, Prince, Cas, and Kit sitting down too. She takes a deep inhale before letting it out slowly, like she’s trying to let go of the hurt I know she’s feeling at being dismissed by her dad. Knowing this and seeing the pain that she is in makes me feel like an utter asshole for not giving her the truth. It’s better this way, because if she ever finds out about everything we’ve had to do the past few years, she’d never want us. Not to mention the suspicion I have that Odette targeted her dad because of his money and beautiful daughter. It would just cheapen what I feel, what we all feel for her.

“Chicken stir-fry...how did you know it was my favourite?” she asks, her forehead creased while she looks up at Prince, Cas, and Kit as they take their seats.

“How did we know it was one of your favorite dishes?” Kit teases, one of his brows raised.

“Fine, point taken,” she grumbles, and we all chuckle at her ire. The moan that she lets out a moment later has us all pausing, chopsticks halfway to our mouths as we each stare at

her with matching expressions of hunger in our eyes. “These are the best fucking noodles I think I’ve ever had,” she gushes, taking another bite and groaning again.

“You keep making those noises, Sugar, and I won’t be held responsible for my actions,” Prince warns her in a dark tone, and I don’t miss the shiver that falls across her, chopsticks frozen midway to her mouth. She takes an unsteady breath, blowing it out through pursed lips, and my rapidly hardening dick twitches in my pants once more.

“I think she wants you to show her, Prince,” I say, filling my mouth with delicious noodles, and her cheeks bloom in that way they do.

“Well, she can eat her dinner like a good girl and then I’ll show her,” he replies, not taking his stare from her. The colour on her cheeks spreads down her neck at his words. Oh yeah, she enjoys being told what to do by Prince very much. Not that I can blame her, he’s one fucking hella persuasive Dom. “And don’t forget to drink your water, darlin’. You haven’t drunk nearly enough today to stay hydrated.”

“How do you know how much I’ve been drinking?” she quizzes, her spine snapping straight as she glares at him. It’s cute as fuck to watch her try to top him from the bottom, and by the twitch of Prince’s lips, he feels the same way. She’s like a kitten that sinks its teeth and claws into your hand when you rub its belly.

“Because, Sugar, I’m always watching you,” he deadpans while grabbing a whole load of noodles with his chopsticks, yet never taking his gaze off her.

“You’re all crazy fucking stalkers, you know that?” she sasses, looking at each of us with an accusing stare.

“Good, you finally understand,” Prince drawls, and I have to bite my lip at the bark of laughter that wants to escape at her incredulous look. “Now eat your noodles and drink your water like a good girl.”

She holds his stare for a second longer, her nostrils flared. Then she huffs out a breath before picking up her chopsticks

and placing more noodles in her mouth, still giving Prince the stink eye.

“Happy?” she asks around a mouthful of noodles, the word muffled. Then she reaches for her water after swallowing and downs half the glass.

“Ecstatic,” he replies in a droll tone, finally looking away from her and at his meal.

Well, fuck me sideways, the tension between these two is something else and I can't wait to be there when they explode.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“EARNED IT” BY THE WEEKEND

EMBER

My eyelids are drooping again by the time we finish dinner, my stomach full and a contented feeling wrapping around me like a soft, snuggly blanket. I don't even realise that my head has drifted to land on Cas's shoulder and I'm slumped in my seat, my hands in my lap until he nudges me awake.

“Come on, Cinders, let's get you to bed,” he encourages gently, and before I can even protest that it's too early, a yawn cracks my jaw almost in half.

“O-okay.”

Cas leads me from the room, the others clearing our dishes as we head down the corridor and upstairs, turning down our wing. I pause before my door, Cas behind me. His warmth is like a balm, and I know that this is too fast, that I shouldn't be feeling so comforted by his nearness, but the part of me that was broken five years ago doesn't care. I feel more awake now than I did moments ago, my pulse loud in my ears as I work up the courage to ask for what I really want.

“Will you stay with me?” I don't turn around, just speak into the door with my hand on the door handle and wait, my heart thudding in my chest. Part of me knows that I'm not just asking about tonight, that I want him and the others in my bed from here on out, regardless of how wrong it is. They make

me feel wanted, needed in a way that I've never felt before. It's like, with them, I can finally let go and be the truest version of myself, not just a grieving daughter or someone who is trying to cling to an almost non-existent relationship with her distant father.

"If you want me to, Cinders," he replies softly, his front pressing to my back in a way that has me shuddering and leaning against him, wanting more of the intoxicating comfort he gives me.

"I want you to stay more than anything," I confess quietly, stilling as his arm brushes my side, his hand grasping the door handle over mine.

"Then I'll stay all night."

He pushes down, swinging the door open, and his other hand lands on my lower back as he urges me forward. We step into the darkened room, and he flips the switch, filling the space with the soft glow of my lamps. I had it rewired when we moved in so the main light never comes on, only the small lamps that dot the room. I prefer the delicate lighting since I hate being assaulted by glaring artificial light.

"I need a shower," I mumble, wincing when I remember I haven't washed since the car ride this morning, when Cas covered my pussy with his cum. I can't say that I've hated having it on me all day, but I really ought to wash it off.

"Let's have a shower then," he suggests, taking my hand in his warm palm and leading me towards my en suite. Again, the light switch only turns on soft lights, nothing too bright, and for the first time, I realise how intimate this type of lighting is. Being in here with Cas is a vastly different experience to being here on my own and I'm aware of each beat of my heart as it pumps blood through each of my veins.

Letting go of my hand, he heads over to the large shower, leaning in to turn it on. The sound of running water fills the room, and several moments pass before steam swirls from the shower as he shifts to face me. His copper gaze trails up and down my body, and I can barely breathe under his heated scrutiny.

He pads towards me, a swagger in his step, and a pleasurable shiver falls over me, but I don't move, just wait. I'm trapped in the stormy spell he's weaving, unable to do a thing as I let him take charge like my mind and body craves.

"Up," he orders, his hands skimming down my arms and taking my hands in his once he's in front of me. He brings them over my head, then untucks my shirt and pulls it off. My arms drift down afterwards, my skin pebbling as he takes me in. His eyes snag on my forearm and go wide, his body freezing, and all too late I realise what he's looking at; the bandage that hides my cuts from this morning.

As though ice water has been thrown over me, I try to hide them with my other hand, my shoulders caving in as my feet shuffle beneath me. I can't look at him, terrified about the judgement I may see in his eyes.

"Don't hide from me, Cinders," he says firmly, a slight rasp to his tone, and my eyes dart to his face before he clasps the wrist of my scarred arm and my hand covering them drops away. I don't want to keep anything from him, even if I'm not sure how he'll react, especially after finding out about his parents. He takes a corner of the tape holding the gauze down, then pulls it sharply off, the sting making a hiss fall from my lips. "These are fresh." It's not a question, but a statement as he looks down at the red-scabbed lines. "But some are old."

My mouth opens, yet no words come out, not immediately anyway, and tears fill my eyes in relief and shame at finally having someone else know my secret.

"Your research didn't tell you this then?" I ask, my tone weary, cautious. I'm not mad that they looked into me, but a part of me will always wish I knew of their existence too before they suddenly appeared in my life. His gaze snaps to mine, the copper bright, and his muscles rigid. It hits me again that his parents took their own lives, and I open my mouth to apologise but he speaks before I can.

"There is still so much we don't know about you, Ember, even if we did stalk you for half a year. But nothing, fucking nothing, will make any of us want you less," he tells me, his

voice unwavering as he steps right into my personal space, his hand tight on my arm. A shiver cascades over my skin where it brushes his soft jumper. Then he grabs my chin with his free hand, forcing me to keep eye contact just as I was about to stare beyond him, unable to face the heat of his passion. “But you come to us for pain if you need it, okay? We will give you what you need, but you stop doing it to yourself right now, yes?” There’s an edge of pleading and panic to his tone, his eyes wild, and a slight tremble in his muscles that speaks volumes about how important this is for him.

I take in a shaky exhale, sudden tears sliding down my cheeks as the tension drains out of me. I want to agree, if nothing else but to see the terror that lurks in his copper eyes disappear, but what would it be like to give up that part of myself? I’ve been seeking relief in this way for five years. It’s a comfort, a release, and I felt the need this morning because of Cas and the others. Though maybe it would be nice to have someone else help when I feel overwhelmed.

“Yes.” My lips form the word even before I’ve completely committed to the idea, and I’m surprised with how okay I feel about it, my body loose and my muscles weak with relief.

“Swear it, Cinders. Promise me you won’t cut yourself anymore. That you trust us to give you the pain you need from now on.” His voice leaves no room for argument, his jaw firm. So I look into his metallic eyes and agree.

“I swear.” His touch on my chin softens, the slight throb of his grip a reminder of my promise. Then I watch as his entire body relaxes, his eyes softening and no longer wild and worried, as though he was terrified of my refusal.

“Good girl. Now let’s get you cleaned up and into bed.”

He strips the rest of my clothes with a reverence that no one has ever shown me before. My sexual encounters before were often hurried, a desperate need to explore, and I’ve never truly taken the time to learn my partner’s body like I’m desperate to study every inch of his and his brothers. He treats me like I’m something to be cherished, something to be worshipped and adored. I’m not sure anyone else has ever

shown me such devotion and attention in this way, and my skin flushes from the way each touch is like a prayer, an act of devotion and reverence.

Then he does the same, taking off his clothes and leaving me incapable of coherent thought. Like the twins, his body is muscular, but he's a little more stacked than they are. His body is covered in beautiful works of art, one image flowing into another, all black and devastating in their beauty. My eyes spot crosses, heavenly light, a beautiful Madonna mixed in with flowers, and death head moths, and two bars shining in his nipples. He's pushing down his jeans before I can study all these images properly, and when he straightens, my eyes go straight to his thick cock, standing hard and proud with that glint on the end.

He just smirks, taking my hand and pulling me into the shower after him. I let out a groan and close my eyes, the water the perfect temperature when it falls over my aching muscles. A sharp gasp falls from my lips when his large hands glide over my breasts, and I open my lids to find Cas washing me, his hands covered in the suds of my favourite lavender and rosemary shower gel.

He keeps everything PG, which doesn't stop my clit from pulsing, and by the small half-smile he's giving me as his eyes follow the path his hands take, he knows exactly what he's doing.

Well, two can play that game, arsehole.

I grab the shower gel, squirting a large dollop onto my palm, and then rub my hands together, creating hundreds of sudsy bubbles. He drops his arms to his sides in simple invitation, daring me to do my best.

Giving him a teasing smile, I sweep my palms over his rock-hard pecs, toying with his nipples ever so slightly and tugging on the bars, eliciting a deep moan from him. His hands come up to grip my waist, his fingers digging in.

"Cinders," he growls as my hands travel lower, tracing the line of each muscle and the V that leads to what I'm really after. Unlike Cas, I decide that the time for teasing is over, and

having decided to take what I want, to live my life to the fullest, I grasp his dick in one hand, my fingertips barely brushing around his wide girth. “Fuck!” he rasps, and I’m inclined to agree.

He feels like velvet steel in my palm, and I slowly pump his shaft up and down, my thumb toying with the piercing in the tip, a desperate need making my vision waver.

“You said that you’d give me whatever I want, whatever I need,” I remind him, my voice low and husky as I continue to work my fist over his length. “I want you, Cas. I want this,”—I squeeze my hand and he hisses a breath—“and I want you inside me right fucking now.”

“Prince will fucking kill me,” he groans, but he hoists me in his arms anyways with his hands under my thighs, and my arms come up to wrap around his neck. Then he presses my back against the tile wall and it’s my turn to let out a hiss as the cold hits my overheated skin. “But you make me not give a shit about any of that.”

Before I can utter a single word, he’s pushing inside me and my eyes roll at the feel of his hard cock stretching me to full capacity.

“Cas!” I cry out, my nails digging into his shoulders as he fills me more than anyone ever has before. “Fuck, Cas.”

“I know, baby. Shit, you feel so fucking good wrapped around my dick, letting me in like you know I own this pussy.” A rush of wetness floods my cunt, allowing him to slide in the last couple of inches, and we both groan and pant at the feel of him fully seated inside me. “Tell me you need me, Cinders,” he breathes out, his forehead pressed to mine, an edge of vulnerability in his tone.

“I need you so bad it hurts, Cas. Please,” I beg, shifting my hips. I’m not lying. I need him to move, to show me I’m owned by him, and even though I know that I’ll never be the same, not after fucking one of my stepbrothers, I couldn’t stop this if I wanted to. “Please.”

“Always, baby,” he whispers, pulling almost the entire way out and then thrusting back inside me so hard that I scream. “I will always take care of you, Cinders. Always give you what you need.”

He fucks me hard and fast, just like I’ve been craving since I woke up with Kit’s tongue in my pussy, and I hold on as my body accepts every punishing thrust, every shock wave that he sends shooting through me.

“Fuck, Cas—” I open my eyes, only to find the dark green sapphire of Prince’s gaze, and with a gasping cry, I shatter, my inner walls clenching around Cas as my entire world rearranges itself.

“Fuck, baby, you’re strangling my dick,” Cas grits out, thrusting his hips harder, prolonging the pleasure that is rendering me speechless, unable to breathe as I hold Prince’s intense stare. Cas stills, a deep, rumbling cry leaving his chest as he buries his face in the crook of my neck and bites down.

The sharp pain sends me spiralling again, lights flashing before my eyes as another orgasm hits me full force. My body is not my own, taken over by pleasure until I’m just a vessel, filled to the brim and overflowing.

We stay together for a few moments, and my skin tingles the entire time. I didn’t realise how much I needed that, and when he pulls out, letting my feet drop to the tiles, my legs almost buckle and he has to grab my waist to keep me from landing in a heap on the floor.

“Cas—that was—Jesus,” I mumble, looking away from Prince and into Cas’s beautiful eyes. He chuckles, the sound low and deep, making my nerves prickle.

“You’re incredible,” he whispers, placing his lips against my own and giving me a kiss that has tears filling my eyes, his short beard tickling my sensitised skin. “What I ever did without you, how I managed, is something I’ll never know.” His lips brush mine with every word, my body shuddering in response.

“Cas...” I reply, my voice thick with the lump that fills my throat.

“It’s okay, Cinders. Let’s get you to bed, it’s been a long day.” He grabs the shower gel, my legs only trembling slightly as he steps away, washing me again, then himself before shutting off the shower.

He doesn’t even pause when he turns around and spots Prince, arms crossed over his chest, leaning in the doorway, his brows lowered and jaw tight. Cool air rushes over my body when Cas opens the door and steps out, holding out a hand to help me out too.

Prince twitches like he wants to rush at Cas, so instead, I hurry to him, pressing my wet body against his and gripping his face in my palms. He doesn’t complain, just straightens up, his hands wrapping around me to pull me in even closer, uncaring of my dripping skin soaking his clothes.

“I needed him, Prince, so badly,” I tell him and then go up on my tiptoes, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. He remains still and unmoving, my throat constricting with worry. “Please don’t be mad, I couldn’t bear it.” My voice cracks on the last word.

“It was probably better it was him first,” he murmurs against my lips, and I’m shaking my head but he stops me with his next words. “I like to hurt when I fuck, Sugar, and I’m not sure you’re ready for me yet.”

My exhale flutters over his lips, and I pull away, letting go of his face with my left hand and using my right to turn his stare in the direction of my forearm. “I need the pain too, Prince.”

I watch as his eyes widen and then go hooded, his tongue coming out to trace his lower lip.

“She promised to come to us if she feels the need to cut again,” Cas adds, pulling me away from Prince and wrapping a warm towel around me, then tucking it so that it stays up. “She swore.”

Prince's eyes flit to mine, our gazes locked. There's so much swirling in those green depths of his; hunger, lust, and a need that takes my breath away and leaves my chest aching.

"Where are your razors?" he asks.

"Bathroom cupboard, in the pink pouch at the back, third shelf," I answer immediately, holding his stare.

I hear Cas open the cupboard, the sound of things moving, and then he's next to us, holding the small pouch out to Prince who takes it and looks it over. It's so pretty, so innocent-looking, the kind of thing that would hold a few items of make-up.

"You come to me when you need these," Prince commands, shaking the pouch slightly.

"Yes, Prince," I agree with a nod and watch as the green in his eyes darken to the colour of ivy leaves.

"Good girl. Let's get you to bed." He places the pouch on the bathroom counter, then takes my hand, guiding me out of the bathroom and into my bedroom. Then he pauses at the foot of my bed, turns, and lets go of my hand. In a move that shouldn't be sexy but is, he pulls his black T-shirt over his head.

My breath leaves me in a whoosh at the sight of him. Like Cas, he is covered in ink, but unlike Cas, Prince is a riot of colours. It travels up his neck, framing his jaw, and glides down his arms, then over the back of his hands and down his fingers. His designs are incredible; a tiger hiding in grass with its mouth open in a roar; blue, purple, and green elephant heads across his pecs and upper chest, and an orange butterfly resting at the base of his throat.

He's stunning, and I want to catalogue every piece of art, but he doesn't even give me the chance to continue ogling him, tugging on my towel until it pools at my feet. The green of his irises grows even darker for a moment, then darkness covers my eyes, my nose full of the scent of rum and leather as he pulls his T-shirt over my head.

I instantly snuggle into the garment after putting my arms through the sleeves, wrapping them around myself in a hug as I take a deep inhale.

“You’ll stay too?” I ask, a slight hint of panic in my tone as my breaths catch. I’m not sure when the idea that I needed them both here with me became crucial, but now that I thought of it, I know I won’t be able to sleep tonight without them.

His entire face softens as his hand reaches out, cupping my cheek. The comfort that slight gesture gives me is visceral, instantaneous, and should leave me worried, but I’m not. How can I be when it feels so right to be with him, with them like this?

“Of course, darlin’.” My shoulders slump, the panic gone as quick as it came, and my eyes close for a moment as a small smile spreads across my lips. “Get into bed, darlin’.”

Opening my eyes, I give him a small nod before crawling into bed from the end, and my smile widens when matching groans sound out behind me.

“That was mean, Cinders,” Cas grumbles, getting in beside me, wearing only his grey boxers. He tugs me towards him and my body instinctively curves around him, my leg draping over his.

The bed dips behind me, and then Prince presses against my back, his hard, very much naked cock nestled against my arse. I wiggle against him, and he growls.

“Sleep now, Sugar,” he orders, his arm wrapping around me as he presses even closer.

I don’t think I’ll be able to, not sandwiched between these gorgeous men, but I find my eyelids drooping, and soon I’m embracing the darkness like an old friend, safe knowing that my stepbrothers will keep the nightmares at bay.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“DYING ON THE INSIDE” BY NESSA
BARRETT

OCT

Kit and I are sitting on his bed, playing video games where—as usual—I’m beating the fucker’s ass. The sound of Ember’s cries of pleasure filtered through the wall earlier, even over the shower, and both of us are sporting semis in our shorts that we don’t bother to hide. Why would we? We’ve seen enough of each other’s dicks in the past few years that it doesn’t even faze us anymore.

The door opens and in strides Odette, our stepmom and the woman who rules our fucking lives with an iron fist. Her clingy, silk nightdress hides absolutely nothing, and a slight chill lifts the hair at the back of my neck, my semi shrivelling at the sight of her. She’s always been open with us, but as we got older, we realised that walking in on us showering and wearing low-cut, provocative things around us wasn’t the normal behaviour of a parent or guardian. We just learnt to ignore it, safer that way than admitting that something might come from it.

“Where are your brothers?” she questions, her eyes trailing over my bare chest, then pausing at my crotch. Her tongue comes out to lick her lower lip and I have to swallow the bile that hits the back of my throat, the feeling of ants crawling over my skin making goosebumps erupt over my flesh. I wish I had a fucking T-shirt or vest or something to cover up, but there’s nothing close enough to hide me from her prying eyes.

“Looking after Ember,” Kit says, pausing the game and drawing her attention to him like he always does. There may be only four minutes between us, but somehow, he thinks that because he’s older, he has to protect me. I cut him a glare, but he misses it and my stomach roils when Odette’s eyes light up.

“Excellent. I’m so glad that you’re enjoying having a new sister,” she purrs, sashaying closer to us. “I want you to take such special care of her. She’s been through so much and I know you can make her feel better.”

Her eyes linger on Kit’s abs, also on display as he didn’t bother with a shirt either. My hands grip my controller tighter at the predatory look in her eyes, and the plastic cracks, her snake-like stare swinging back to me. She smiles, but it’s not a nice one. Instead, it’s full of a smug satisfaction that I want to swipe off her botoxed face.

“Well, I’ll say good night, boys.” She leans over, brushing her fake tits up against me as she presses a kiss to my cheek. I have to hold my breath to stop from breathing in her overpowering, sickly sweet perfume. It reminds me of dying flowers; cloying and sticks to the back of your throat. I don’t know how Ember’s dad stands it.

I breathe a quiet sigh of relief when she pulls away, only to grit my teeth when she does the same to Kit. I see his body shudder, his jaw clenching as he tries to hide his revulsion. She’s a fucking spider, but she’s all we have and all we’ve known for so long.

We’re quiet for a long moment after she leaves and closes the door behind her. I can’t help the maelstrom of toxic thoughts from swirling around my head; could we have tried harder to get away from her? Put our foot down a bit more? And most worrying of all, what is her fascination with our new stepsister? I toss the controller onto the bed, flopping back and covering my eyes with my hands.

“We should just tell her to fuck off, take Ember and leave.”

Kit sighs. “We can’t, not yet anyway. It’s not the right time. Prince said—”

“Fuck what Prince says!” I leap from the bed, my nostrils flaring as I pace beside it. I’m so fucking done being used by Odette. “Do you not see her interest in Ember? She’s fucking up to something, and I swear to god, if Ember gets hurt...”

The thought of Ember having to do what we’ve done...my fists clench at my sides. No, she has her dad, he’d never let that happen, and he’s loaded, so it’s not like we’re short of money anymore.

“She won’t get hurt, Oct,” Kit says, coming to stand in front of me, forcing me to stop pacing like a caged animal. Then he grasps the back of my neck, bringing our foreheads together. “She has us, and we won’t let Odette or anyone else hurt her.”

“I know.” I close my eyes and try to let the rage drain from me, taking several deep breaths until my tightly coiled muscles relax. “I’m just so tired of not being able to have a life, Kit. It was fun and games when we were younger, but I want to do what I want for once.”

“We will. We’re set up here, money isn’t an issue anymore, look at this place.” He pulls back, using his grip to turn my head, forcing me to look around at my room. He’s right, it’s the nicest bedroom I’ve ever had, and the one back home wasn’t bad. We were okay money-wise, we weren’t loaded like Ember and her dad, but we had everything we needed. My shoulders loosen further as his logic sinks in and pushes some more of the panic and anger away.

“What are you going to do when you grow up?” I ask him. It’s the question that we have asked each other ever since we were little. It’s become more of a comfort over the years, something to keep us from going crazy as our control was slowly taken away.

He chuckles, letting me go and sitting back down on the bed, then his hand runs through his hair as he stares into the distance. “I think I’d like to study architecture. The gallery we went to today? It was incredible, and I’d love to work with old buildings, maybe. Not sure I’d be any good at it, but I’d like to

try.” He looks up at me, his deep blue eyes calmer than I’ve seen them in a while. “You?”

Musing, I chew my lip, looking around at the plush room. “I’m pretty good with computers,” I say slowly, churning the possibilities around in my head. “I think maybe game design.” I’m warming to the idea the more I think about it. I like the creative element and I enjoy the challenge of playing them. I used to want to be a cop, farmer, fireman; it’s changed a lot over the years, but Kit has always had an interest in art and design. “Or become the most sought-after hacker in the world.” I catch the pillow that Kit throws at me, and then I flop back onto the bed, picking up the controller again, my thumbs playing with the controls. “The fuckers stole our night with her.”

“Yep, they sure did,” Kit replies, picking up his own controller and resuming the game. “We’ll have to be quicker tomorrow night.”

“Amen.” The thought of our new little sister has my dick twitching again. She’s a shining beacon we’ve all needed for far too long, a light that calls to our darkness.

She doesn’t know all your secrets though, she’ll probably be disgusted if she finds out...

I shut down that fucking cunt of an inner voice, not allowing my fears and worries to take root. We’ll just make sure she never finds out about all of that. It’s all in the past, and that’s where it’s going to stay.

CHAPTER NINE

“WHITE LIES” BY BOLSHIEE

EMBER

I wake up to delicious warmth, the combined scents of rum, leather, and toffee apples mixed with that undeniable musk of man filling my nose and leaving me feeling calm and desperate all at once.

It's still early, the sky outside just turning lilac with the rising sun, and ignoring my lust, I wiggle from between my sleeping stepbrothers and head to the bathroom to pee.

After washing my hands, I stare at my reflection, at the way my eyes sparkle for the first time in years and the way my cheeks are slightly flushed, trying to recognise myself. This is the girl who had sex in the shower with her new stepbrother, someone she's only known for a little over a day. One who wants to have sex with the other three too and has every intention of making it happen, fuck the taboo nature of it all. Who feels so comfortable with the new men in her life that she's not quite sure how she lived without them before.

“You weren't living, Ember. You were surviving,” I whisper to myself, watching my lips move and knowing that I'm speaking the truth.

Ever since cancer stole my mother five years ago, I've been lost, my anchor gone, and my father becoming almost like a stranger as he threw himself into work to escape his grief. Oh, and apparently dating with marriage in mind, that

seemed to have been a thing I knew nothing about. My stomach tightens, my eyes misting at the thought that I'm moving on without my mum. I know she would have wanted me to and would be ecstatic that I am, but I can't help the flash of guilt that she's not here and I am.

The need to paint suddenly overwhelms me, and I follow the urge, leaving the bathroom and walking over to my nook by the large windows. Taking a fresh sheet of paper, I clip it to my easel and then pick up a pencil, closing my eyes for a moment as I just breathe.

Opening my eyes with renewed purpose, I grab my headphones and then open Spotify, selecting one of my favourite songs. The deep, seductive tones of Bolshiee singing "White Lies" caresses my ears, making my nipples pebble, and my hand flies across the page, the lines taking the shape of three figures, limbs tangled.

Grabbing my watercolours, I mix up copper and green, letting the paint drip down the page. Then I add yellow in the middle, my breaths coming in pants as my fingers practically throw the colours onto the paper, my thighs becoming slick as I lose myself to the fantasy in front of me.

Strong hands grasp my upper arms and I gasp as I'm spun around. Prince's green eyes are so dark that I fall into them headfirst, losing myself in their depths. My brush darts out, painting a strip of yellow across his chest, claiming him as my own. His lush lips split into a wide, feral grin and his hands travel upwards, the sensual song filling my ears as he grips the neck of the shirt I'm wearing, his shirt, then he yanks.

The fabric rips down the middle as my brush hits the wooden floor with a clatter, the sounds muffled by my headphones. My body jerks with the force, my heart pounding as his emerald eyes devour me. Reaching past me, he takes hold of the brush that's covered in the exact shade of his eyes and brings it between us.

The first stroke of the bristles has my entire body lighting up, the cold wetness of the paint doing nothing to cool my fevered skin. He trails it down my breast, around my nipple,

and then moves to the other side, repeating the movement until my body quivers with every touch of the brush. My fists clench and unclench at my sides, the touch of the brush more sensual than I ever knew it could be. The telltale tingles of an orgasm brushes along my nerves, and my thighs squeeze together as I seek friction to ease the desperate need he's building.

His eyes snap to mine when a small whine leaves my throat, and I feel it vibrate inside me, my need for his fingers to touch me so strong that I can't stop from pleading with my eyes.

Touch me.

Fuck me.

He drops his brush to the hardwood floor, his fingers pushing the rest of the ruined T-shirt off me until I'm just as naked as he is. My gaze darts down to see his tattoos really do cover every inch, leaving just his thick, hard, massive cock untouched. My eyes widen as I wonder how on earth that beast will fit inside me.

The music stops, and I look up to see Prince placing my headphones on the table behind me. My entire body is taut, I'm on the edge, just needing a small nudge to freefall.

"Don't worry, Sugar. I'll make it fit." His voice is all masculine assurance and male pride, and the boy has something to boast about, his dick the biggest I've ever seen.

Oh lord. My thighs clench tighter, more wetness sliding between them at his filthy words.

"Please, Prince," I whisper, my voice shaky as fuck, but the need to have him fill me is unlike anything I've ever felt before. My body is weeping for him. The dark look in his eyes promises me it will hurt so good, and I'm desperate for his brand of pain.

"Such a good girl for me, begging for my dick at just the sight of it," he purrs, his fingers trailing down my side. God, even that small touch has fire racing through me, and I sway

towards him, wanting whatever he will give me. “Up on the table.”

I cast a glance behind me, seeing my table full of art supplies, but he gives me no more time to think, crowding me until my arse touches the edge. Then he bends, grabbing my thighs and lifting me onto the top as if I weigh nothing. My hands cling to his powerful shoulders, feeling the flex of his muscles as he settles me to his liking, my legs open and my pussy pulsing with his nearness.

The wood digs into my soft flesh, but it only adds to the friction that’s building between us, that has been building since he walked into the room and introduced himself two days ago.

He steps back slightly, just enough so that he has a clear view of my body, and when he sucks his lower lip between his teeth, I almost lose it completely, a wanton moan falling from my lips before I can stop it.

“Prince...” His name comes out on a whine, a plea for him to put me out of the misery that he’s created.

“Shhhh, darlin’, I’ve got you,” he tells me softly, spitting into his palm and slicking it over his dick. That shouldn’t be so hot, it’s saliva for fuck’s sake, but I can feel more of my slick wetness coating my folds at the sight as he gives himself a couple of leisurely pumps.

Closing the distance between us, he uses his tip to rub up and down my slit and it almost blows my fucking mind. My back arches, my nails digging into the wood either side of me, and my hips thrust forward, desperate for more.

“More, please, Prince. I need more,” I beg, close to tears at this point. My entire body shakes and trembles, thrumming with need for him.

“Such a needy little sister, aren’t you?” he muses, teasing me again with the glide of his hard tip.

“Please, please, please, Prince.” My words are like a repetitious prayer as my body tightens, an orgasm just out of reach.

“As you beg so prettily, darlin’.”

With no other warning, he snaps his hips forward and thrusts inside me with such power that the table rattles, and the crash of art supplies accompanies my scream. I have no time to worry about the noise, or even be pissed that my precious art supplies are strewn across the floor, because the force of his entry, the buildup he gave me, has me seeing stars as soon as he’s fully seated. His mouth covers mine as my world explodes in vibrant colours, my hands gripping his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin as I come around him so hard I’m shaking and my vision blurs.

He allows me a single moment to bask in the glow of one of the most intense orgasms I’ve ever had, and then his hands grip my thighs and he fucks me so forcefully that I know I’ll be sore after. The bite of pain has me throwing my head back and crying out his name over and over again, my body trembling as orgasm after orgasm hits me until they all meld into one and I can’t fucking breathe with how good it feels.

I open bleary eyes to watch him, his lips pulled in a tight grimace as he watches the place where our bodies connect, then his head snaps up, his jaw tight.

“You’re going to come for me again, Sugar,” he grits out, and I’m shaking my head before I can even formulate the words.

“I-I c—can’t, Prince,” I moan, my voice a cracked whisper.

“You can and you will,” he commands, taking my left arm in his hand and bringing my forearm up to his lips. He doesn’t stop his brutal thrusts, and he watches me as he opens his mouth, right over my scabbed cuts, and then bites down.

My pussy walls clamp down on him, my entire body tensing as the pain heightens the pleasure, and then I’m screaming as I fall into rapturous agony once more. My climax erupts from me, coating Prince, and with his roar of ecstasy, he buries himself so deep that he practically invades my womb as he fills me with his cum.

My chest heaves, my body slick with sweat and pain, tingles racing across my skin as I hold him to me with my free arm and just try to breathe again. My mind is a blur of sensation, reduced to mush by his massive cock and the multiple orgasms that he just gave me. I'm floating, surrounded by a blissful cloud that I know I will crave for the rest of my life. He stays inside me, his own back rising and falling, his face buried against my neck. My left arm hangs limply at my side, his fingers brushing over the skin and sending goosebumps all across my body. When I finally bring it up to inspect it, blood drips from the cuts, the shape of his teeth marks indented into the skin. It throbs, and he lifts his head, looking at me and then my arm.

Leaning over, he presses a light kiss to the wound, and then his lips are on mine, his palms cradling my face as he kisses the shit out of me, the copper taste of my blood coating my tongue. Prince decimates me with his kiss, he owns and possesses me with his lips and tongue, allowing no other option than to bow to him. I open for him, letting him take as I drink him in, my hands tangling in his black hair and pulling him closer.

He pulls away slowly, and I love that his lips look bee-stung, that he looks just as dishevelled as I feel.

"Fuck, that was..." he trails off, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows, and then he presses his forehead to mine. "You're incredible, Ember."

We both groan when I clench around him, the sound of my name on his lips exquisite.

"How can it be like this, Prince? How can it feel like this?" I ask him, my fingers still gripping his hair. My heart feels like it's too big for my ribs to contain, my muscles twitching as I'm overwhelmed by my need for this man. For them all.

"Because we were always meant for each other. I'm just sorry it took us so long to find you."

The warmth of tears slides down my cheeks, and he kisses each one as a hot body presses up against my side.

“Don’t cry, Cinders,” Cas soothes, his hands gliding over my body, pulling himself closer to me even as Prince refuses to let go or slide out of me, his cock still semi-hard, as if he doesn’t want to leave the comfort of my body as much as I don’t want him to go. “We’re here now, and you’ll never be alone again.”

A sob rips through my chest at his words. How did these guys see right to the heart of my loneliness when I’ve never admitted to anyone how alone I’ve been?

One hand leaves Prince to grasp Cas around the neck, pulling him in for a kiss which he gladly gives me.

“Thank you,” I whisper against his lips, my limbs feeling shaky and a little sore now that my high is settling into a warm glow.

“Always, baby,” he answers. “Now let’s get you cleaned up and fed.”

I gasp when Prince finally pulls out, his eyes darting down to my bright pink, abused pussy and his cum which trickles out a little.

“You’re going to be so full of our cum, darlin’, that we’ll always be with you wherever you are.”

I shiver, my mouth suddenly dry. How does he have the power to turn me on with just a sentence?

He places one last kiss on my lips before sauntering to the balcony doors, letting in a blast of frigid air when he opens one and slips out, heading towards his room next door.

“Come on, baby,” Cas murmurs, helping me off the table and then supporting me when my legs almost give out. He chuckles. “He does like it rough. I know from experience how much that bastard enjoys using his monster cock as a weapon.” My eyes widen and I lick my lips.

“Do you guys...” I trail off, unsure how to phrase it exactly as Cas’s warm arm wraps around my waist.

“Do we fuck each other, Cinders? Is that your question?” His copper eyes shine in the morning light, and my whole

body goes hot at the thought.

“Yes, that’s my question,” I reply in a barely audible whisper.

“We’re family, we take care of each other, remember?” he says, leading me to the bathroom, his arm supporting me on my shaky legs. “And we enjoy pleasure in all its forms, especially when it’s with someone you’re already close to. The twins aren’t with each other in that way, but we all know what the others like in the bedroom. Does that bother you?”

We stop just outside the bathroom door, and he turns to glance at me, his forehead wrinkled, the light of the dawn behind him creating a halo effect.

“N–no. It doesn’t bother me,” I tell him, my heart fluttering inside my chest at the thought of them pleasing each other and of me being in the centre of all that. A small amount of tension leaves his shoulders, like he was a little worried about my answer, even though he’s hinted at this aspect of their relationship before.

“Does it turn you on?” He waits, his copper eyes boring into mine, even though I’m pretty sure he knows my answer already if the smile playing around his lips is any indication.

“Yes, it turns me on.” I don’t hesitate with my answer, my voice clear, and the wide grin he gives me tells me that was the right response.

“I’ll make sure the others know that too. I’m sure they’d be happy to indulge any fantasies you might have. You are family, after all.” He has a wicked gleam in his eyes as he resumes our steps to the bathroom. The idea of them together has me weak at the knees, and not for the first time, I wonder how I got so lucky to have them drop into my life.

CHAPTER TEN

“ESCAPE” BY AZEE

EMBER

Cas helps me to the shower, leaving me to it after saying that he couldn't trust himself and I definitely need a break after the pounding that Prince gave me. His words, and I blushed like a giddy schoolgirl when he said them.

He wasn't wrong though, it's not just the freshly opened scabs that are throbbing. There's a dull ache between my thighs that makes me smile every time it pulses as I walk down the stairs and to breakfast.

“Little Spark!” my dad greets, getting up from his chair and striding over to me as soon as I walk into the room. “I take it by your smile and glowing complexion you had a good day with your stepbrothers yesterday?”

His face is wreathed in smiles, and he pulls me into a giant bear hug that reminds me of my childhood. He hasn't held me like this for so long, and most of the anger from the other morning and his railroading about college melts away as I hug him back, breathing in his sandalwood aftershave that he's worn for years. One of the guys snickers, and I cast a panicked look over my dad's shoulder at them as my cheeks flame at the memories of all that has transpired between us since then. All of them are smirking, the fuckers.

“Um, yes, it was lovely,” I reply, Oct’s oomph sound letting me know that he probably said something to either Cas or Prince and got a kick under the table for it. “We went to the National Gallery.”

“I’m so pleased to see you having fun and with people your own age.” He pulls away, studying me, and his brows dip slightly, his blue eyes so like my own dulling a little, and I worry I didn’t school my features quickly enough to hide exactly how much I’ve been enjoying my new brothers’ company. “I’ve been worried about you, Ember,” he adds, his hands squeezing my upper arms as his eyes rove over me. “But I think having brothers suits you.”

Oh, my god, can the floor open up and swallow me whole now, please?

I can’t even focus on the fact that he’s never before mentioned his worry as my cheeks flush hot. I know exactly how well having brothers suits me, but I’m damn sure it’s not in the way that he’s thinking.

“Having a little sister certainly works for us,” Kit comments, coming over and taking my hand in his. I give him wide eyes and suck in a sharp breath, but as I flick my eyes to my dad, all I see is an indulgent father looking at his daughter and her new stepbrother. *Can he not see the way Kit looks at me? Like he plans to devour me whole? Can he not feel the tension between us, that unfulfilled promise from the other morning?*

“Let’s eat. Odette and I have some exciting news for you all,” my father announces, and my stomach swoops as I wonder what new revelation he will drop on me next. A bitter taste fills my mouth, my anger from earlier returning full force. He’s been so absent for the past five years, and then to keep dropping bombshell after bombshell on me as if it means nothing... As if *I* mean nothing to him. I pull up short on my way to the table, Kit stopping too.

I’m happy for my dad, glad that he’s finally found someone to share his life with, but was he so blinded by his

own grief, consumed with his own life and the woman at his side, that he couldn't see mine?

“You okay, Pretty Thing?” Kit asks me quietly, and I take a stuttering breath, noting that the others are staring at me, a mix of concern and worry on their faces.

“Yes, sorry,” I mumble, letting him lead me towards the table. I try to see things from my dad's point of view, it must have been unbearably hard for him to lose the love of his life. My muscles tense at the thought of losing even just one of the guys, and I've known them for far less time than my dad and mum were together for.

“We're all here, Pretty Thing,” Kit whispers in my ear, and I realise that I've got his hand in a death grip, my breathing grating in my chest.

“How did you know that's where my mind went?” I ask under my breath as he leads me to my chair, in between him and Oct this morning. He lets go of my hand to pull out my chair, bending down to speak in my ear as he pushes it in for me.

“You looked as panicked as I feel at the thought of anything or anyone taking you away from us.”

My heart gives a solid thud inside my chest, the pulse reverberating across my entire body like a gong has been struck, and I let out a trembling exhale. This is just so fast, too fast for me to keep up with it. One minute I'm alone, getting through each day as if wading through a thick, grey fog, and the next, my life is filled with the bright colours of four boys who have taken me as their own and are carving their way into my heart.

I can't find it in me to regret meeting them though. Albeit the strength of my feelings is terrifying, I want to live in technicolour. I want to experience the world feeling the way they make me feel, like I finally belong.

“Morning, little sis,” Oct greets, his hand landing on my thigh, his palm warm through my cotton tights, and it's enough to jolt me out of my panic. I've opted to wear a long-sleeved,

flouncy mini dress with a blue, floral print and some knee-length, brown leather boots. “You look beautiful this morning, and so thoughtful of easy access for your brothers.” His voice is a low whisper, but my eyes still dart to my father to check he didn’t overhear. He’s oblivious though, leaning down to listen as Odette murmurs something in his ear.

Kit sits down as Oct’s palm coasts upwards and I squeeze my thighs together, blood making my cheeks heat once more, and the pit of my stomach tingles as his fingers brush my apex. My eyes close, my hands clenched in my lap as I try to breathe through the heady rush of desire that floods my veins. It doesn’t matter that I have cotton tights and knickers on, he may as well be touching my rapidly soaking core.

I should try and stop him, but clearly, I’m more fucked up than I knew because I love the thrill of the threat of exposure as much as I dread it. It makes my pulse sing, makes me feel alive.

“Now that you’re all here,” my father begins, and I snap my attention to him, even as my legs part slightly of their own accord. “Odette and I have decided that we ought to go on honeymoon, now that we’re married and all.” My father looks over at Odette, and she simpers in a way that I can’t help feeling is a little false. Do I look like that when one of the guys looks at me? I fucking hope not. “So we’re leaving for the Cayman Islands first thing tomorrow for three weeks of sun and sea.”

Oct’s hand pauses, and I stare wide-eyed at my father and Odette as the realisation hits me smack in the face; I’ll be at home, alone with the guys for three weeks. No dad. No Odette. Just us. My mouth goes dry at the same time adrenaline rushes through my body and sets my pulse racing.

Fuck.

“That sounds fantastic,” Cas says, but I can’t look at him, at any of them, because I can feel their eyes burning a hole in the side of my head. If I do, I won’t be able to hide the excitement, the raw fucking desire that’s coursing through my body this very moment, sore cunt notwithstanding.

“Your tutors will still come Monday to Friday, starting tomorrow,” Odette tells us, and I can’t decipher the look she gives the guys. It’s almost as though she knows what’s going on between the guys and I, and I catch Prince’s slight nod in Odette’s direction as I quickly glance at him. “Don’t worry, Ember. My boys will take good care of you.”

I don’t realise I’ve been worrying my bottom lip until she speaks to me and I go to answer. “I—I’m sure I’ll be fine. It’ll be nice to have some company for once. You guys just have a great time.”

“Oh, we will have the best time, won’t we, Richard darling?” She turns her hazel eyes onto my father, and I can practically see heart-eyes emojis in his. My chest aches fiercely as a sense of loss washes over me. It feels like I’ve finally lost what little I had left of him.

He’s happy, Ember. That’s all that matters.

“Let’s have breakfast, then we can all have a lazy day together,” Dad suggests, and I go to reach for a bowl and some muesli.

“Oh, Ember, honey. I had the kitchen prepare you something special,” Odette says, and there’s just something about her tone that feels disingenuous. I pull my hand back from the bowl and muesli, a heaviness settling in my stomach.

Sally, one of our staff, places a tall glass in front of me, full of what looks like green sludge.

“What the fuck is that?” Oct exclaims, his nose wrinkled, and I’m inclined to agree with him, my nose twitching as I try to stop my upper lip from curling and failing.

“Octavius Dante Johnson, you watch your language at the table!” Odette scolds, her face full of a rage that seems far too extreme given the situation. Oct looks down, his ears reddening.

“It’s okay, darling. He’s just a passionate young man,” my father assures her, trying to keep the peace. I watch as he strokes her hand, and she shakes her head slightly, her face transforming back into its serene beauty.

I ignore the alarm bells that ring in my head at just how quickly her face can morph from rage to normality, instead, placing my hand over Oct's that is still on my upper thigh and squeezing it. He gives me a small, grateful smile, and I wonder what hold she has to make him feel so bad about a single swear word.

“As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted,” Odette continues, and I grind my teeth at the way Oct shrinks back a little. “It’s a wheatgrass smoothie, and is a great antioxidant, plus aids in weight loss.”

I can feel my cheeks burning, my body frozen as I stare at the glass of green goop. I’ve heard of wheatgrass, and decide it looks fucking revolting even if it is good for you.

“How thoughtful of you to help Ember, honey,” I can hear my dad say, but I can’t take my eyes off the horrible concoction in front of me. A weight settles inside my chest, a flush creeping up my neck as I face something else that Odette has casually taken from me. “I didn’t know you were on a diet, Little Spark.”

Tears sting my eyes at his words, and I don’t know what to say. Sure, I’m not supermodel thin like Odette, I mean, who the fuck looks like that, really? But I didn’t think I needed to lose any weight.

“Oh, us girls just know these things, don’t we, Ember?” I slowly bring my gaze upwards, refusing to let the embarrassed tears fall. Odette just looks at me like she really is helping me out, and I’d believe it too if there wasn’t a spark of something in her hazel irises, a malicious sort of pity perhaps? Oct’s hand squeezes mine but I barely feel it, and all my mind can focus on is that Odette basically just called me fat and no one called her out on it.

Hurt lances through me like a hot poker, everything that has happened crashing over me and rendering me unable to talk, to tell Odette to go fuck herself and that her boys don’t seem to mind my curves, but then, why don’t they say anything?

“Um, yes. I—I think I might take this upstairs if that’s okay? I’m feeling a little tired.” Not waiting for an answer, I rip my hand away from Oct’s and grab the glass, ignoring the concerned call of my father as I rush from the room.

“FIND YOU” BY THE PHANTOMS

CAS

I watch Ember flee the dining room, the glisten of tears in her beautiful, blue eyes, as the pounding of a war drum sounds in my ears. My fists are clenched so tightly around my knife and fork that I’m not even surprised to see that I’ve bent them a little, and I count backwards from ten just to calm myself enough not to launch myself at Odette.

“I hope she’s okay,” her pathetic, fucking clueless father says, but to give him some credit, he looks genuinely concerned, his brows pitched low.

“It’s probably her time of the month, Richard.” Odette titters, and I know her cycle has nothing to do with why she left in such a hurry. We know from her medical records that she’s got a coil, so she doesn’t have periods particularly, not that I’m convinced her not being on birth control would have stopped either myself or Prince from coming inside her.

“Perhaps one of us should check?” Kit asks, and I see her father soften as he stares at Kit. I get he has always wanted sons, or so he told us the many times we met him back in New York, but maybe if he spent less time travelling for business and more time with his daughter then she wouldn’t have been so alone.

“That would be great, Kit. Thank you.”

Kit immediately gets up, even though he’s not eaten anything, and rushes out of the room. I don’t miss the croissant

he swiped and hid in his pocket before he got up. We may not be able to stand up to Odette how we would like to, the fallout would only make it worse for Ember in the end, but we can do something to mitigate her vile fucking behaviour.

I push my plate away, my appetite gone when I think about the look on Ember's face as she fled and what she must think of us for not standing up for her. For not telling Odette to go fuck herself because surely any red-blooded man would prefer Ember's luscious curves over the bag of bones that is my stepmother.

Fuck, it's only the second day and we've already failed Cinders.

We'll just have to work extra hard to make it up to her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“TIDAL WAVE” BY CHASE ATLANTIC

KIT

I could fucking kill that bitch! As if what she’s put us through over the years isn’t enough, she has to pick on Ember who has been nothing but welcoming ever since we stormed into her life. Odette thinks she’s got us under her thumb, exactly where she wants us, unable to speak up, but we’re just biding our time. She’s in for a rude awakening now that we have something worth fighting for.

The things we’ve done over the years to help, to keep us all afloat would make most people sick to their stomachs. Sure, sometimes it was fun, but lately...I shudder, swallowing down the self-disgust and hurrying after the one light to come into our lives.

I hear Ember’s door slamming shut just before the distinct *click* of the lock as I reach it. Then her sobs follow soon after and my heart cleaves in two.

Fucking Odette. Jealous cunt.

“Ember, Pretty Thing, let me in, baby,” I plead, my palm and forehead pressed against the wood as I beg her.

“Go away, Kit.” Her voice is thick with tears, and my palms clench into a fist against the door.

“Never, Pretty Thing,” I promise before leaving the door and heading into my room next to hers. Then I stride to the French door that leads to our shared balcony, opening it and

walking out into the still-chilled morning air. The sun is halfway up, not quite warm yet, but it looks like it might be a beautiful day, and I won't let our girl spend another moment steeped in sadness.

The crack in my heart grows when I look through the French door to see her curled up on the bed, her arms wrapped around herself and facing away from the window, those sexy leather boots in a heap on the floor. The glass of green shit is on the bedside cabinet and I want to hurl it against the wall, my fingers twitching with the need to eradicate it from our lives. I've been forced to suffer similar revolting drinks in order to 'keep in shape' as Odette put it, we all have, and I remember the way it made me feel, the underhand critique of my body, as if I wasn't enough as I was. It just makes me feel even more shitty for not protecting Ember from Odette's harsh words.

The cold metal of the door handle gives way as I push it down, and I breathe out a sigh of relief that she didn't lock this as well. I would have been able to break in, but I'd rather not have to explain why we needed to fix the glass.

"Baby," I greet softly as I shut the door behind me and rush over to her. "Ignore that jealous bitch, you're fucking perfect." She huffs a laugh that's so bitter it stings as it reaches my ears.

"Right, you say that now, but not fucking one of you stood up for me when she effectively called me fat downstairs." Her words hit hard, like a punch to the solar plexus as there is truth to them. We didn't stand up for her, and it'll be one of the things that I'll add to the long list that makes me hate myself. She shuffles away from me, still refusing to look at me, so I toe my sneakers off and get on the bed, placing the pastry on the side table before kneeling behind her. Her lavender and rosemary scent washes over me, and it goes some way to calming the simmering anger that's bubbling away inside of me. "I'm just a plaything for you all, something to fuck until someone better comes along."

"Look at me, Ember." My voice comes out harsher than I intend, and I hate the way she flinches slightly. "Please, baby."

Slowly, she turns around, uncurling like the most beautiful flower, her eyes and nose red, but fuck, she looks pretty when she cries. Though only if I'm the one causing the tears to fall and only when she's begging me to stop giving her pleasure.

"You are fucking perfection, fuck what anyone else thinks or says," I insist, leaning over and grasping her chin, not allowing her to look away from me. "And if you were just a toy, something to play with and discard, we wouldn't have spent months obsessing and finding out every minor detail about you." *Lies*, a whisper flits through my mind, but I ignore it. She may have been nothing more than a shiny new toy before we met her, but as soon as we saw her, we all knew. "You. Are. Ours."

I move around her, forcing her to her back, making her legs part as I gaze down at her from my knees.

"Kit—" She's cut off with a yelp when I reach underneath her dress, grab her tights, and yank them and her panties off in one harsh move.

"I wouldn't crave you with every fiber of my fucking being if you weren't something special, Pretty Thing," I tell her, shifting so that I'm settled on my elbows, my face hovering above her sweet, pink pussy. It's swollen and looks well-abused, and blood roars towards my dick so fast that I go a little lightheaded. "Oh, baby, Prince fucked you good and hard this morning, didn't he?" I don't give her time to answer, just dip my face and lick her slit. "Shit, you taste so fucking good, you know that?"

She moans as I dip my head and lick her again, her sweet musk bursting on my tongue in a flavour that I know I will crave every fucking day for the rest of my life. She's already dripping for me, probably in part because of Oct's attention under the table before everything went to shit.

I dive in, showing her exactly how fucking beautiful she is with my tongue, sweeping it across her slick folds and lapping up every drop of pleasure she bestows on me like the gift it is.

"Fuck, Kit..." she groans, her tone still thick with the tears she shed as her hands tangle in my hair, and I smile against her

pussy. Then she pulls me closer, and not a man to argue when a feast is presented, I set to work again, my tongue dipping inside her heated channel, my dick so fucking hard that it's a miracle it's not snapped off with how roughly I'm grinding it against the bed.

This is all about her though, all about showing her she is more than I ever could have dared hope for, and I'm never letting her go.

"Come for me, Pretty Thing," I command, feeling the tremor in her thighs as I force them wider before going deeper with my tongue.

Her pussy flutters around my tongue, a deluge of pleasure soaking my chin and filling my mouth as she cries out her orgasm. She's so fucking responsive, and she comes so beautifully that I keep going, needing every fucking last drop she'll give me.

When she's a trembling, twitching mess, I finally let up, pushing up and crawling over her. She blinks up at me, her eyes half-lidded and her cheeks flushed with her golden hair a mess, and she's never looked more beautiful.

Then I lower down, pressing my lips against hers, and just like that first morning, she opens to me, kissing me back with a passion that she hides most of the time. One day we'll get her to show it to the world.

"Don't make me fall for you and then leave me, Kit. It would break something inside me that could never be fixed," she murmurs against my lips, and I'm shaking my head before she's even finished.

"There is no world where that would even happen, Pretty Thing," I assure her, settling more of my weight on top of her and pushing her body into the mattress. My jeans-covered dick is pressing into her burning core, and it's taking almost more willpower than I possess not to open my zipper and slide inside her swollen cunt. "You are it for us. There is, and never will be, anyone else."

She stills, her eyes darting between mine as she whispers, “You barely know me.”

Chuckling, I brush my lips across hers and hold her tighter. “I’ve known you for a lifetime, Ember. I know you feel it too.”

“It scares me,” she confesses so softly I almost miss it, and would have if I wasn’t staring at her lips.

“I know, baby, but the best things usually are fucking terrifying.”

“POISON” BY FREYA RIDINGS

EMBER

We get up, and Kit gives me another kiss before leaving me to shower—again—and change. I strip the bed too, placing the now wet things in the laundry basket and getting out fresh sheets and my spare duvet. My cheeks heat when I think about what the staff will think. They’ll know what the stains are from, surely? Though I know that they would never say anything, I make a mental note to go online and buy a sex sheet.

“How did this become your life?” I ask myself as I look in my mirror, seeing the blush spreading across my cheeks. I went for another short dress with long sleeves, the first being such a hit earlier, but opted for my furry, slipper booties as we are staying at home.

A sharp rap on my door has my head snapping upwards, my heart thudding inside my chest.

“Cinders?” My shoulders sag, the tension leaving my muscles as Cas’s voice filters through the thick wood. I’m not sure who else I worried it would be, but I think seeing Odette right now wouldn’t be the best idea. I’m not sure if I would

burst into tears again, or slap her plastic face for making me feel so small. Kit's pep talk seems to have helped build my confidence back up. I rush over to unlock it and then pull it open, finding his pinched forehead smoothing as he takes me in. "You okay?"

Aside from coming harder than I ever have before...

"Yes," I answer, feeling my cheeks heat even more and wondering when the reaction will lessen as it's all I seem to do around these guys. *Does he know what Kit did earlier?*

"Look, I'm sorry about breakfast. I should have said something, but fuck, no excuses." He looks me dead in the eyes, his full of remorse. "I apologize, Cinders. I should have told Odette to fuck off. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever met, the best fuck of my life—"

"Cas!" I whisper-shout at him before grabbing his arm and tugging him into the room, slamming the door behind us. "Someone might hear you!"

"I don't give a shit," he says, his tone a low growl that has my nerve endings tingling. He spins us, crowding me until my back is pressed against the door, his arms bracketing me in, and I can't seem to draw a full breath as his copper eyes engulf me in metallic flame. "I want the world to know how fucking incredible you are. How fucking mine you are."

The last part is said right against my lips, and the brief touch leaves me reeling and lightheaded.

"Cas..." It's a moan, a prayer, and I'm not even sure what I'm asking him for. My hands fist his shirt, the soft, light green cotton making his eyes pop and spark as he rakes them over me.

"If I hadn't watched Prince fuck the life out of you earlier, Cinders, I would be buried deep inside that beautiful cunt right now," he tells me, and my knees feel so weak that I'm not sure how much longer I can keep standing. "But you need a rest, so come downstairs and watch the movie with the rest of us."

It's like a bucket of ice-cold water has just been poured over me, and even the warmth of his body pressed against

mine can't warm my suddenly chilled skin as I swallow hard. "Is— Is Odette going to be there?"

He heaves a sigh, then presses a tender kiss to my temple, and my eyelids flutter at the touch. "Yes, but you'll be sitting with us, and I promise if she says anything, I will call her out on her bullshit."

"You would do that for me?" I press my face into his chest, inhaling the toffee apple scent that will forever remind me of Cas.

"I would burn the fucking world down for you, Cinders. Standing up to that bitch is nothing." My heart stills inside my chest, and a question bubbles up before I can stop it.

"Then why didn't you earlier?" I feel sick asking it, the thought that I really am not enough for them making something inside me shrivel and die. Even after Kit's assurance that I am all he's ever wanted, actions speak louder than words, and it still hurts that none of them stood up to Odette earlier. His chest expands beneath my hands and his exhale ruffles my hair, his forearms either side of my head. The skin bunches around his eyes and his jaw clenches as he takes a shuddered inhale.

"A lot has gone down in the past. It's fucking messy and complicated, and I—" He huffs out another breath, his eyes tormented and his brows lowered. I hate the shadows there, but I won't push him to tell me all their secrets, not if they're not ready to. "But this is a fresh start for us. I forgot that for a moment, and I will apologize for the rest of my days for letting you believe anything other than that you are a fucking goddess, Ember."

My name on his lips has a similar effect as when Kit used it earlier. It makes my breath quicken, my entire being flooding with warmth when they use it.

"Will you tell me about it? About what has you all so scared of her?" I don't think he's going to answer, his body so rigid that I can feel the tension thrumming through him.

“One day, Cinders,” he says after a long pause. “But for now, come watch a movie with me?” His copper eyes plead with mine, and I feel my walls crumbling under his gaze.

“Okay.”

His whole body sags, a breath rushing out of him as his mouth tilts up in a small smile, and then his lips are against mine and I’m fucking lost. He’s like a poison, a drug that I’m still not sure won’t kill me, but I’m powerless to resist. I melt into him and his hand cups my face as he deepens our kiss, almost as though he will steal my very soul from my lips, and I know now that regardless of the fact I’ve only known these guys for a short time, I’d let any of them take it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“STROKE” BY BANKS

EMBER

We spend the rest of the day in the family room watching films and chilling. After a delicious lunch of homemade pizza, Odette and Dad go off to pack their last few bits, so I snuggle between the twins, my body relaxing fully as the huge screen plays the opening credits of *Birds of Prey. Fucking love Harley Quinn.*

Oct drags a blanket over us, and I rest my head on Kit’s shoulder, breathing in his lime, mimosa, and cedar scent, letting it wash over me in a soothing wave.

“Are you sniffing me, little Ember?” he asks, a teasing note to his voice, and I freeze, my nose firmly buried in the crook of his neck.

“Is that weird?” As I say it, I realise how strange it sounds that I even have to ask. Of course it’s fucking odd to go around sniffing hot guys.

“Not when you do it, baby,” he assures me, and my chest swells when he angles his head so I can take in another lungful. A wicked idea comes to mind then, and even though I should be worried about my father or Odette coming back into the room, the risk of being caught seems to have become my new kink because it just makes my heart beat faster and my thighs squeeze together. I dance my fingers down his soft T-shirt and over his muscular abs, which clench and ripple as my

hand heads lower. “What are you up to, Pretty Thing?” There’s a hitch to his tone, a breathiness that makes my core heat.

“You made me feel so good earlier,” I tell him in a low whisper, and he hisses a sharp breath when I pop open the first button of his jeans. “I’m just returning the favour.”

He widens his legs, and a rush of power flows through me at having him following my lead for once. Having opened all the buttons, I slip my hand underneath his boxers and wrap it around his hard length. His nostrils flare, his skin flushing as I pull him out, pausing when I feel something unexpected running down the underside of his impressive shaft. My fingers tease down what feels like metal bars, counting them.

Holy. Shit.

He has a Jacob’s ladder with eight fucking rungs on it.

“You found my accessories then,” he murmurs in my ear, his hand coming over mine and taking my fingers up and down the bars. “I can’t wait for you to feel them inside you.”

My poor aching pussy clenches, my centre flooding with heat.

“That needs to happen soon,” I tell him, and he laughs, a deep husky sound that has my thighs squeezing tightly together.

“As you command, Pretty Thing...” The last syllable of my nickname trails off into a masculine groan that I know the others hear when I once again fist him and pump slowly.

“What are you doing to my brother, little sis?” Oct asks, pressing against my back, the heat of his body leaving me shuddering.

“Making him feel good, as a little sister should do,” I reply, and four growls fill the room.

The rush of knowing that I affect these stunning men so much goes straight to my core, drenching my knickers, and I tighten my grip on Kit.

“Fuck, baby,” he moans, his hand dropping away from mine and letting me truly take over. I skirt my thumb over the

tip, swiping up the pre-cum and swirling it around the head. His hand lands on my thigh, his fingers digging in as I shift to have better leverage, giving Oct more of my back.

“Twist your fist, little sis, he likes that,” Oct breathes in my ear, and I follow his instruction, my breath quickening when Kit curses. “See.”

Oct sweeps my hair to the side, kissing and nibbling my neck as I move my fist, watching Kit with half-lidded eyes. His head is resting on the back of the sofa, his eyes closed as a pained bliss covers his face.

“Shit, I won’t last long at this rate,” he groans, his hips thrusting forward, and the blanket slides down so that I can see him fully, see the piercing glinting in the film’s light, my fingers not meeting as I hold his shaft and pump it faster.

My tongue darts out, licking my lips, and all I can think about is how I want to taste him, how I need his flavour on my tongue.

“Oct?” I breathe out, my voice a huskier version of my normal one.

“Yes, little sis?” he says, pausing in his attention on my neck.

“Hold my hair, please?”

“Why would he— Fuck!” Kit swears as I swoop down, my lips closing over his head, and I moan at the salty, musky flavour of him.

I take him deeper, breathing through my gag reflex as he hits the back of my throat. His metal is an unfamiliar experience, the hard material contrasting the soft skin of his cock. Oct gathers my hair up in his fist and then uses his grip to pull me up before forcing my head down until Kit is buried in my throat.

I can only take in a sliver of air and my thighs are soaked with how fucking hot it is, my fist still holding the base of him as he’s far too big for me to swallow completely.

“That is beyond hot, Sugar,” Prince moans, and I open my eyes, sliding my gaze over to the other sofa to see him palming his own monster cock as he watches us.

“You take him so well, Cinders,” Cas praises from next to Prince. He gives me a wink, then shuffles around and takes Prince’s dick into his mouth. The moan that leaves my throat vibrates down Kit’s shaft, and his hips jerk, burying himself deeper in my throat. I couldn’t breathe even if I had the room.

The sight of Prince’s cock disappearing down Cas’s throat has rendered me utterly incapable of coherent thought.

“You like that, huh, little sis?” Oct whispers in my ear, finally pulling me up, and I take a huge, rasping breath. He keeps Kit’s dick in my mouth though so I can only murmur my agreement, sucking Kit’s head harder the more I watch Cas. “She’s so fucking perfect for us, isn’t she, brother?” Oct asks, and then he’s pushing me back down, making me choke and gag on Kit’s cock.

“Fuuuuck...” is all Kit can say, his fingers stroking my jaw as I bob up and down, saliva and tears dripping down my hand and making his cock even slicker. “I’m gonna fucking—”

He groans long and low, burying himself so deep in my throat that all I can do is swallow the cum that he pours into me.

“Don’t worry, little sis, I got you,” Oct purrs, and then his fingers are darting into my knickers, toying with my clit. I’m so worked up that I explode within seconds, my cries muffled by Kit’s dick which is still buried to the hilt in my mouth.

I pull off him with an audible sound just in time to see Prince thrust his hips up and Cas’s head down, Prince’s head thrown back in exquisite agony as he comes, and another smaller orgasm trembles over me, leaving me shaking and floating.

I slump back against Oct, who wraps his arms around me and pulls me close, brushing my sweaty hair off my forehead and peppering kisses all over my temple.

“That was... Shit, I can’t even think right now you made me come so fucking hard, Pretty Thing,” Kit gushes in a breathless whisper.

Then he leans over, his palms cupping my hot cheeks, and presses his lips to mine, uncaring that my mouth must taste like his cum as he kisses me slowly and so deeply that my heart aches. I’ve never felt as treasured as I do by these guys. They make me feel like I’m worth something that cannot be replaced.

He reluctantly pulls away, rubbing his nose against mine before he slouches back and tucks his now soft dick back into his pants. I shuffle on the leather, my tights completely ruined, and my nose wrinkles.

“I need to clean up,” I tell them, Oct helping me to my feet. My legs feel like jelly, and we all laugh when I wobble.

“Come here, Cinders,” Cas orders, and I make my unsteady way to him and Prince. Leaning up, he cups the back of my head, dragging my face down to his and giving me a kiss that has my toes curling. The taste of Prince is still on his tongue, and I lap it up, my hands gripping his shirt. “Such a good girl for your brothers,” he praises as he pulls away.

“Always,” I breathe out, butterflies taking flight in my stomach as I straighten up and release my hold on him.

A smile splits my face as I open the door, closing it quietly behind me. Turning around, I come to a stop, my heartbeat thrashing in my ears as I come face-to-face with Odette.

“I’m glad to see my boys are taking such good care of their sister,” she remarks, and my brain whirls. Did she hear us? Or is this just an innocent remark? “Oh, don’t look so scared, Ember. They’re passionate boys, it was only a matter of time before they convinced you to get into their beds.”

“It’s not like that,” I blurt out, my hands flying to cover my mouth as if that will stop the incriminating words that have already escaped, but I know it’s too late when she gives me a Cheshire grin.

“Well, either way, I’ll keep your little tryst to myself as long as you don’t make my life here difficult. With my boys or your father.” Her face is serene, probably on account of all the botox, her smile wide, but her eyes are sharp, cutting into me and leaving me feeling raw.

“Why would I make things difficult?” I choke out, lowering my hands to my sides, still keeping my voice low so as not to alert anyone to our conversation.

“Oh, honey,” she coos, reaching out and tucking a strand of hair back from my face. I flinch, and bile fills my throat at her touch, at the way she appraises me as if I’m something to be used. “Things can always get difficult when there’s only ever been one woman in a man’s life, and now there are two, but we understand each other, don’t we? So there’s nothing to worry your pretty little head about.”

My jaw clenches, my lips pressing into a flat line, but she has me over a barrel. I don’t want my dad to know what’s happening between me and the guys, otherwise, he might send me away. He might send *them* away, and the thought of not seeing them again has my pulse racing and my stomach knotting.

“There’ll be no trouble from me, Odette.” My voice is monotone as a numbness fills my limbs and tears prick at my eyes.

“Good. Now, why don’t you change out of those clothes and join them for more movies? Your father and I are going to have an early night, we’ve such an early start tomorrow.” She leans in, placing a light kiss on my cheek, and I don’t miss the way she takes a deep inhale, no doubt smelling what just went down in the living room. “Good night, Ember. Make sure to give my boys all they need while I’m away.”

A shudder works its way through me, and I swallow repeatedly as I try not to throw up all over her red, silk robe. As soon as she pulls back, I flee, uncaring that she’s seen my weakness, because I just can’t stand another moment in her presence. Racing up the stairs and to my room, I slam the door behind me.

I press my back to the wood, in the same place that Cas had me earlier, but unlike then, my heart is racing for an entirely different reason.

Something is not right about all of this. Something big that I'm missing.

And I'm afraid I won't find out what it is until it's too late.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“ELEPHANT” BY FREYA RIDINGS

EMBER

I wake up alone, and the emptiness that fills me has my breath catching and a lump in my throat forming. I shouldn't feel this way after only two days with them in my life. Shit, it really has been a little over forty-eight hours since I've met them. A shiver runs through me at the thought of how close I've let them get, at how much I already depend on them for comfort.

I locked my door after coming upstairs last night, crawling into bed after changing, not able to face the guys after my run-in with Odette.

There's a heaviness in my limbs as I lie there, thinking about what she said, what she didn't say, and what it all means. Though the puzzle pieces just aren't fitting together, and with a heavy sigh, I get up and head to my bathroom, screeching when I glimpse a dark figure outside on the balcony.

“Fuck! Prince!” I gasp, heading over and unlocking the door. I'd locked it too after the last time Kit came in that way. The sky is grey, an oppressive cloud covering it, and the wind is biting as it wraps its icy fingers around me. I pull him in, hissing when my hand makes contact with the bare skin on his arm. He's only in a thin cotton T-shirt and jeans, no shoes or socks. “Shit, you're freezing.”

My heart thuds painfully inside my chest as I take in his expression. It's intense, his green eyes travelling over me, even as his body shivers.

"Y-you didn't c-come back last n-night," he states, his teeth clacking together as he speaks and I swallow hard, tugging him into my room before slamming the balcony door shut, and then pulling him towards the bathroom. Leaving him just inside the doorway, I reach in and switch on the shower.

"Have you been outside all night?" God, what if he's got frostbite? It's only February, it can still get below freezing overnight. "What were you thinking?! You're only wearing a fucking T-shirt for Christ's sake and you could get sick or—" Panic makes my chest tight, and it's suddenly hard to breathe, my eyes darting over him, looking for any sign that he might be ill.

"Sugar... Hey, baby, breathe." He's there, his frozen hands holding my face as my vision wavers. "In and out, follow me." One hand grabs mine, placing it on his pec, and I suck in a desperate breath when his chest expands. "That's it, good girl."

My head clears and the sound of the shower behind me replaces the sound of my racing heart that was all I could hear moments ago.

"D-don't you ever do something so stupid again, Prince," I tell him, my voice thick and my throat full of glass. "If anything happened—"

"I'm sorry, darlin'. I was worried about you. *We* were all worried about you, but the others said to give you space. I just couldn't leave you alone." His own voice is rough, and there are deep etches in his brows, his green eyes tracing my face as if cataloguing every movement. He was scared too. I don't know his full story, but I know that, like me, he's lost someone, and it's left a mark on his soul as deep as my own.

"I won't lock that door again. I won't shut you out, Prince. I'm so sorry." Using my hand on his chest to pull him to me, I bite the inside of my cheek when his frozen skin touches mine.

“I’ll tell you why I did it, but right now, we need to get you warmed up, okay? I need to take care of you.”

A deep shudder runs through him, and I wonder if anyone has ever cared for Prince before or if he’s always been the one to take care of people. I see the way the others defer to him, look to him for leadership, but we all need to be looked after every so often.

Stepping back a fraction, I tug at the hem of his T-shirt, lifting it up and encouraging his arms to rise. Then I bite down on my lip hard to stop the panic from rising when I notice how pale his usually golden skin is underneath all his ink. He must have been outside all night.

We don’t speak as I undo his jeans, pushing them down his hips, but there’s no time for me to admire his beauty, my need to make sure he’s okay is too strong to pause for even a moment. My hands are shaking as I pull my sleep shirt off—a T-shirt I stole from Kit—and then grab his hand and lead him into the shower.

He hisses out a curse when the warm water touches his skin, and my breathing picks up when I try to recall the signs of hypothermia. Fuck, maybe a hot shower isn’t the best option right now. He might need to be seen by a doctor, or go to hospital, or—

“Ember!” I blink, gasping a breath when his now warm hands are on my face. Wide, bright green eyes stare back at me, his brows deeply furrowed. “Sugar, I’m okay. I don’t have hypothermia. I wasn’t out there all night. Fuck, baby, I’m so sorry I worried you.”

I burst into tears and he pulls our bodies flush as I sob loudly against his chest, which is already warming up. He holds me, the hot water pouring over us as he rubs soothing circles over my back and whispers assurances quietly in my ear.

“I—I don’t do well with people I care about getting sick,” I confess after a long beat of silence, my arms wrapped tightly around him. “N—not after what happened with Mum.”

“I’m so fucking sorry, Ember. I shouldn’t have worried you like that. I just wanted to make sure you were okay and I lost track of time, but I’m fine. I’ve the constitution of an ox.” I huff a small laugh, the sound unconvincing, but he pulls my face away from his chest and brings our lips together.

He kisses me sweetly, and it’s so unlike the Prince that is dominating but is exactly what I need right now.

“Let’s get washed up. Can’t be late for the first day of home-school,” he teases as he pulls away, and I pause when I remember what day it is.

“I’d forgotten about that,” I say, twisting to grab the shower gel and squeezing some into my palm. “What will you be doing today?”

I don’t even know my timetable, but I’m sure I’ll find out soon enough. A pang goes through me when I think about my friends back at Morley College. I still don’t really see why the guys couldn’t have joined me there. It’s one of the best private colleges in the country.

“Oh, the usual,” he says, his eyelids fluttering as I rub my hands over his torso and down his arms. I love the feel of his skin underneath my fingertips and the way his muscles twitch and flex. “Sugar, you keep touching me like that and we’ll definitely be late.”

“Sorry.” I chuckle, heat lighting up my body as his dick hardens between us.

“Never apologize for touching me, baby,” he replies, reaching past me to grab the bottle and squeezing some shower gel into his palm. “I love that you want to take care of me, that you want your hands on me as much as I need mine on you.” He glides his soapy palms all over my body, paying me back for my teasing touch just moments before, and when I try to arch into him, he *tsks* and shakes his head. “Later.”

Frowning, my core on fucking fire, I let him turn the water off after we rinse and then watch his biteable arse as he gets out. He wraps a towel low around his hips before grabbing another and holding it out for me.

We head into my room and all the while my mind tries to think of ways of getting him back for leaving me with blue ovaries.

“I’ll see you downstairs,” he says, kissing me on the lips and then heading back out of the balcony door.

Sighing, I turn to my walk-in wardrobe and contemplate my choices, a smile tugging my mouth upward when I spot my old college uniform still hanging there.

Fucking perfect.

I’m the last one to enter the dining room for breakfast, and four pairs of jewelled eyes swing my way, heat making the colours shine brighter as they trail down my body.

“Fucking hell, little sis,” Oct rasps, his eyes burning as he takes in my outfit. I tucked my white school shirt into my plaid mini skirt which hits high on my thighs. Combined with knee-high, white socks, chunky-heeled Mary Janes, and two French braids, the naughty schoolgirl look I was going for is complete. Looks like my efforts have paid off too.

“One should always try for the first day, don’t you agree, Prince?” I question, my eyes locked on his green ones. He swipes his thumb over his lower lip as he studies me, and I’m glad my father and Odette aren’t here because the sexual tension in the room is off the fucking charts. Turning to Kit, who’s closest to me, I catch his gaze. “I bumped my hip on the way down, can you check there’s no bruise for me?”

I keep my expression all wide-eyed innocence as I lift the side of my skirt, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek when four groans sound out as they realise that I’m not wearing any underwear.

“What the fuck did you do, bro?” Cas grumbles just as the door handle rattles, and I drop my skirt, twirling to face the door I just came through while flashing the guys my bare arse as the material lifts a little.

“Miss, the first of the tutors is here,” Reginald announces with a small bow. Gosh, I wish he would stop doing that.

“Thank you, Reginald. We’ll be along presently,” I reply, and he gives a nod before leaving the room and shutting the door with a quiet *snick*.

“Not until you’ve eaten, Sugar,” Prince commands, his voice slightly strained, and I mentally high-five myself.

“Of course, sir,” I sass back, and the growl that vibrates from his chest has my thighs clenching. He clearly enjoys being addressed like that. Noted. The chair between him and Cas is free, but I decide that I’m not quite done playing the brat, so instead, I turn back to Kit. “Is this seat taken?” I indicate his lap, and he gives me a boyish grin that has wetness coating my inner thighs.

“No, miss.” Scooting his chair back, he pats his knee and I lower myself to sit on it, biting my bottom lip between my teeth when my bare pussy rubs against his jeans. His arms wrap around my waist, and he pulls me back until our upper bodies are flush. “Remind me never to piss you off, Pretty Thing,” he whispers in my ear, and this time a peal of laughter rings out from my lips.

I haven’t felt this...free in so long; the feeling goes straight to my head, leaving me almost dizzy with the rush of how much fun it is just to not be serious and mess around a little.

I eat whatever Oct feeds me, Kit’s hand resting on my upper thigh but going no further, his form of payback. I’m just glad his jeans are dark, perhaps the damp patch I’m pretty sure I’m leaving won’t be so obvious then.

After a few minutes, I quickly finish up.

“We should probably get going. What’s our first class?” I ask as we get up from the table, annoyed that Odette didn’t even leave a timetable, never mind letting me choose what subjects I’m doing. I know a one-on-one tutor is better than a full-class situation, but I can’t help feeling like I’m losing all control over my life.

“We all have English first,” Oct tells me, settling his arm across my shoulders as we head toward the library, where our lessons will take place. “Then Maths.” He laughs when I make a face. “And after lunch, you’ll be doing art while we do fencing and other sports.”

“What about the subjects you guys want to study?” I ask, and he pauses, all of us stopping just outside the library doors. “And shouldn’t Prince and Cas be at university by now?”

“We’ll talk to Odette once she and your dad get back,” Cas says from the other side of me, and I glance at him, seeing the way a flush creeps across his cheeks, and the fact the others won’t look at me but down at the floor instead.

“It’s always been this way, us being home-schooled, we get a better education,” Oct adds, but his tone is uncertain, like he’s trying to convince himself as much as he is me.

“You have to fly the nest sometime,” I tell them gently, all of their faces snapping towards me, and I can’t help wondering why she’s kept them at home for so long. “I’m sure Dad will be happy to help you guys with anything if you want to go to uni.” I look at Prince and then at Cas.

“You are too good for us, Cinders,” Cas replies, a slight rasp to his voice as he cups my cheek in his palm and kisses my lips softly. I should worry that someone will see, but with my father and Odette away for three weeks, I can’t find it in me to care right now. So instead, I enjoy the feel of his mouth against mine. “We should go inside,” he whispers against my lips, and I nod reluctantly before pulling away and taking a deep inhale.

“Let’s go to school?” I say, but it sounds more like a question, and the guys laugh as they open the door and we walk inside.

The morning goes by faster than I thought it would. Our English tutor, Mrs Brown, is engaging and animated. I

enjoy her discussion on how a study found only six narrative plots, which pretty much every story fits into.

I struggle a bit more with Maths, having bid that subject good riddance a long time ago and fully intending on never studying it again. Mr Green isn't a bad teacher, he's interesting, and with his moustache, round glasses, and waistcoat, he looks every inch the old mathematician. Kit, Oct, and Cas are all really fucking good at Maths. Prince is like me, hopeless at sums, and I whisper to him it's our creative brains that make the subject difficult after Mr Green asks him a question that he can't answer. Poor Prince's cheeks bloom in embarrassment as he fumbles his response. It's nice to see one of them blush for a change, though I wish it weren't through shame.

The grateful smile Prince gives me is enough to make me not hate Maths so much, but I vow to chat with Odette when she and my father return, telling her I won't be continuing with the subject. They can't force me to take it—I haven't done so for the past couple of years—and it's not one I need for getting into Goldsmiths.

We have a quick lunch, then the guys make their way down towards the gym in the basement that I've never used, and I head into the sunroom, squealing when I see an easel set up and a table full of art supplies laid next to it.

"I'm glad to see your excitement, Ember," a deep, feminine voice says from my left, and I turn my head to find an older woman, her grey hair up in a messy bun, wearing the brightest dungarees I've ever seen. "I'm Mimi, and I'll be your art teacher."

"Hi," I reply, giving an awkward as fuck finger wave, even though she's standing in front of me. Ugh, sometimes I wonder about how I ever managed around people. She just chuckles and then holds her hand out to indicate two of the wicker chairs.

"Odette mentioned that you'd like to attend Goldsmiths?" she asks, tucking her legs up under her after she sits down. I cross mine, slightly regretting my life choices right about now

as I'd love nothing more than to get comfy, but I'm not sure Mimi wants to see my clamshell.

"That's the goal, yes," I tell her, my fingers toying with one of my pigtails. "I'm not sure if I'm good enough though." I suck my lower lip in between my teeth, worrying it.

"Hey, from what your previous tutors sent over to me, you are very talented, Ember. We just need to make sure you've got all the things they'd like to see in your portfolio. Can you bring that next time?" I nod eagerly, the need for Mimi's approval after such a compliment making my heart beat faster. "Fab. For today, how about we let go and you show me what you enjoy doing best?"

"Okay," I say, excitement flooding my veins as I get to my feet and head over to the table. Everything is in neat rows, unlike my nook upstairs which is organised chaos. My fingers itch to rip open all the packets and I hear a soft laugh.

"Use anything on there, Ember. It's all yours to do with as you see fit."

Reaching out, I snag a pencil, an idea already beginning to form in my mind of what I'd like to draw, then I touch the tip onto the fresh piece of paper. It's so blank, so bare, and ready to take whatever I give it.

Taking a deep inhale, ignoring the fluttering in my stomach of having someone observing, I drag the lead across the page and make my first mark.

Hours drift by, and when I come back to myself, the paper is no longer a pristine white. Instead, a portrait stares back at me, one half a young woman, her gaze fierce and unyielding, yet colourful flowers tangle in her long hair on one side. Her face morphs into the head of a lion, his mane a riot of jewel colours, a look of protection about his features.

"Absolutely stunning, Ember," Mimi says, coming up behind me and placing a hand on my shoulder. "You were so lost in your creativity, as happens to many eminent artists. I adore the use of colour, the way the ink drips down. It's beautiful. What does it mean to you?"

I trace the lines of the piece with my eyes, my pulse slowing as the adrenaline from simply creating wears off.

“That sometimes your heart knows things that your brain refuses to acknowledge.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“LOVERS HURRICANE” BY SELIN

PRINCE

The rest of the week goes by quickly with English and Math in the morning, followed by some sort of physical activity; fencing, squash, and boxing after lunch. Our PT—Andy T—is an ex-marine and his training is brutal as fuck, but I welcome the burn as I push my body to its limits. It helps me to forget the guilt that is an ever-present weight on my chest.

Worry that we are still under Odette’s thumb and that I’ve not got us out yet. I want to be independent as much as I know the others do, but until now, it’s not been an option. We have nothing of our own. No money aside from what Odette gives us, no real qualifications, and I couldn’t see just how much she was controlling every aspect of our lives until it was too late. Until we were in so deep that I didn’t know how to get us out.

The worst part, the thing that keeps me up at night, is the simple fact that I’ve not protected my brothers from the toxic shit we’ve done, which eats away at them as much as it does me.

Yeah, it used to be fun and games, but after a few years, it got old, and it made my stomach turn when the twins became involved a little over five years ago. Sure, they didn’t mind, but I fucking did. I know how much it tarnishes you, how dirty you feel afterwards, and no amount of washing will ever get you clean.

“Motherfucker!” I yell, my head snapping to one side with the force of the blow that Andy delivers, pain shooting up the side of my face.

“Head in the game, Prince,” he replies with a growl as I swipe at my lip, leaving a smear of crimson on my arm when I pull it back.

I give him a vicious smile, then throw a punch that he blocks, only to catch him with a swipe of my leg, taking his feet out from underneath him. He lands with an *oomph* on his back just as the door to the gym slams closed.

I look away from him to see Ember catching sight of me, her eyes widening when they take in my busted and bleeding lip.

“Prince! Watch—” I don’t hear the rest as I’m suddenly feeling the mat beneath my spine and all the air leaves my lungs.

“What did I tell you about paying attention?” Andy grins, holding out his wrapped hand for me to take. I smile back, grasping his palm and letting him help pull me up. Before I know what’s happening, Ember is right there in front of Andy, pushing him in the chest.

“Why is he bleeding, asshole?” She shoves him again, but of course, he doesn’t move and I can see him biting the inside of his cheek to not laugh at the small, blonde firecracker trying to take him on. “Are you fucking laughing at me?” Her voice is like ice, and I watch as Andy grimaces at what must be the death glare she’s giving him.

“Hey, Sugar, we were just sparring, and I wasn’t paying attention,” I tell her, grasping her shoulders and spinning her to face me. Her gaze immediately softens, her hand coming up to palm my cheek as her fingers trace the wound on my lip.

“But you’re b–bleeding,” she says, a slight wobble in her voice, and I realize that maybe this is like when she found me outside her room on the balcony, shivering from the cold.

“I’m okay,” I assure her in a soft tone, my chest tightening. Fuck, no one has ever really cared whether I’m hurt. I mean

the guys, my brothers, don't want to see me seriously injured, but a few scrapes or a busted lip? That's nothing to worry about. "I'm fine, baby."

I pull her towards me, and she comes willingly, clearly forgetting in her concern that Andy is there, and wraps her arms around my waist, resting her face on my bare, sweaty chest. Warmth suffuses my limbs at the fact that she's here, worried about me and in my arms, and I look up at Andy with a narrowed stare. He holds his hands up in a 'not my fucking business' kind of way, then turns to go help the twins with their session.

"I don't want any of you hurt. Ever," she breathes out, and my heartbeat races, drumming inside my chest at how we got so fucking lucky to have someone like her in our lives.

We both jump when the gym door slams open, and I pull her closer, my shoulders tensing when Reginald, their butler, comes hurrying in. His usually put-together appearance is in complete disarray, his bow tie askew. The hair lifts on the back of my neck as his eyes scan the room before resting on Ember in my arms.

"M-Miss E-Ember?" he stutters, and as he comes towards us, the glisten of unshed tears shines in his eyes, and his hands tremble and shake.

"Reginald? What's wrong?" She turns in my arms, but I don't let her go, the pit in my stomach telling me that his news is not good.

"I-it's Mr E-Everly. T-there's been a-an a-accident." He can hardly get the words out, and I feel Ember going rigid.

"What happened, Reginald?" The way her voice is barely above a whisper breaks something inside of me, and I don't want to hear what's next, but there's nothing I can do to stop it.

"H-he, Mr Everly, went fishing just off the coast. T-there was an unexpected swell and it swept him overboard. He..." His face is so pale, and his hands quiver when he holds them out, as if to help ward off the blow he's about to give.

"He what, Reginald?"

My eyes stutter closed, unable to look at the old man as I know what's coming, have experienced this news too many times.

“I—I’m so sorry, Miss. He’s dead.”

“IN THE STARS” BY SAMI ROSE

EMBER

My knees buckle, but there’s no pain because I don’t hit the floor. Instead, I’m swept up into powerful arms that pull me close. Rum, leather, and cedar surround me, and I nuzzle into Prince, blocking out everything else.

He’s dead.

Two words that have the power to change my life.

How can he be gone? He’s always been there, even when he withdrew and buried himself in work, he was still there.

“Breathe, Cinders. Come on, baby.” Cas sounds panicked, and it’s enough to have me gasping, air hitting my lungs, burning as it gives me the oxygen I didn’t realise I was denying myself. Bright, copper eyes creased in concern, stare back at me.

“Cas—” My voice doesn’t sound like me. It’s a broken, agony-filled plea that hurts as it leaves my throat.

“I’m here, baby. We’re all here.” His toffee apple scent fills my nose, and as I pull him closer, the softness of my bed registers, as does a warm body pressed behind me, arms holding me close. *When did I end up in my room?*

“Tell me this is a nightmare, please, Cas,” I beg, knowing that I wouldn’t have them with me if I was in one of my nightmares.

“I wish I could, Cinders. Fuck, I wish I could.” His voice is rough, and I bury my face against his chest, hearing the rhythmic thump of his heart as mine fractures into tiny pieces.

A wail sounds around us, like that of a wounded animal, and it takes me a moment to realise that it’s me making that noise. That I’m the one screaming and crying as if it will make a difference. As if it might bring back my dad and I won’t be an orphan.

“Please calm down, little sis,” Oct’s broken voice sounds in my ear, but I can’t stop, the pain inside me is too great to hold back.

“This will help her sleep,” someone new says, a voice that features in the blurry time after my mother’s death, when I was lost to grief and had to be sedated more often than not. A voice that is always present in my nightmares, even if the doctor meant no harm.

“No...” My plea is ignored though when I feel a sharp prick in my neck, and then I’m met with nothing but blackness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“LOST MY MIND” BY ALICE KRISTIANSEN

EMBER

I don't know how many days I spent in the dark, surfacing briefly, only to dive back down into the black because it's easier to face than the agony of my reality.

“I won't fucking get her sedated again.” Prince's angry voice floats into my mind, and a deep sigh leaves my chest at the sound. There's a comfort in knowing that he's close.

“Prince?” My voice sounds cracked and bleeding, raw, and the pain in it has my breath stilling.

“I'm here, Sugar.” A warm hand strokes my face, and I lean into the touch, trying to absorb all the security and warmth that it's offering me. “Can you open your eyes for me, baby?”

The effort to lift my lids is almost impossible, but slowly, I blink them open, and his green irises are all I can see. I hiss a breath as the ache in my soul pulses, his image turning watery as tears mar my vision.

“It hurts so much,” I confess in a hushed whisper, and his brows dip, his palm holding my cheek tighter.

“I know, darlin', but you can't hide away from it forever. We all have to face the pain at some point.” His gentle gaze sears into me, and the moisture spills over onto my cheeks, burning me as he forces me to sit in my heartache. “If you don't, it'll consume you, Sugar.”

A small whimper sounds in my throat, and I beg him with my eyes to take this agony from me. After a few moments, a soft sigh leaves his lips, his thumb brushing my cheek.

“I can help take the pain away for a little bit, without the meds, if you want me to?” he offers, his other hand moving into my line of sight. Blinking the tears away, my gaze darts to the side. He’s holding my pouch, the one that contains my razors. The tension drains from my body at the sight, a lump forming in my throat.

“Please, Prince.” My voice is barely a whisper, but I know he hears me by the way his nostrils flare, his jaw setting. There’s also a flash of something in his eyes, something that looks a lot like heat.

“Prince—” Cas’s tone is full of pain, a searing agony that I’m struggling to make sense of right now when Prince gives me a nod. All I can focus on is the bliss that the slice of a blade can offer me, and I don’t trust myself to deliver the cut right now. I don’t trust that I won’t take it too far, but I do trust Prince.

“We’ll make sure it doesn’t go too deep, Cas. She needs this, look at her.”

I twist my head slightly, recognising the softness of my bed underneath me as Cas comes into view. He’s sitting on the other side of me, and there’s a fine tremor in his limbs as he stares at the pouch as if it’s poison.

“Please, Cas,” I beg him with every fibre of my being. I need the release from all this torment that’s threatening to drown me. His jaw is hard, his copper eyes locked on mine. He takes a deep inhale, then gives a sharp nod, and my eyelids flutter closed for a moment. “Thank you.”

The bed shifts underneath me, and then his heat presses against my back as he wraps his arms around me and pulls me close.

“But you come back to us after this, okay? Fuck, we’ve been so worried about you, Cinders.” His voice cracks at the end, and my chest tightens as I reach for his hand and tangle

our fingers together, using it to eliminate any distance between us.

“I won’t do your arm, Sugar. I’m going to do the outside of your thigh, so you know whose cuts these belong to,” Prince tells me firmly, moving the blanket off me and letting the cool air of the room caress my body. Goosebumps pebble my heated skin, anticipation sending shivers across my nerve endings.

I peer down to see that I’m only in shorts and a tank top, and I wonder how long I’ve been out because I’m sure I wasn’t wearing this the last time I was awake.

“How long have I been...” I don’t know how to finish the sentence. Since I’ve been asleep? Sedated?

“Four days on and off, little sis,” Oct replies in a pained tone, getting onto the bed in front of me. Prince moves further down and lets Oct slip next to me, whose hand cups my jaw, his head dipping before he takes a huge inhale, which given that I haven’t showered in several days, can’t be hugely pleasant, but tension leaves his body as he snuggles closer. I place my free palm on his chest, feeling his steady heartbeat through his cotton T-shirt, allowing it to further calm me.

“Four days, sixteen hours, twelve minutes,” Kit corrects from beyond Oct, his voice sounding choked, and there’s a pain in the back of my throat at how much they’ve suffered over the past few days too.

“I’m sorry,” I tell them, holding Kit’s stormy stare. His blue irises are so dark that they’re almost black, and there are purple smudges under his eyes as if he’s not slept a wink in all that time. His features soften, and he, too, climbs onto the bed, scooting up so that he’s behind Oct, who shuffles lower, my hand slipping from his chest as he rests his head over my heart, between my breasts.

“No apologies needed, Pretty Thing,” Kit tells me, taking my hand and placing a kiss on my palm. “We know what it feels like to lose someone.”

I flinch, and they all tighten their grip on me, the crinkle of paper attracting my attention back to Prince. A small, silver razor blade glints in his fingertips, and my heartbeat picks up, adrenaline making me a little giddy.

Prince looks from the blade to me, his green eyes sparkling. “You ready?”

I’m breathless, anticipation making me tingle all over. “Yes.”

The fingers of his other hand trails down my outer thigh, more goosebumps following in their wake. “Four cuts, one for each of us.” A small smile tugs my lips upward, remembering that’s what I thought the last time I cut myself.

I watch, transfixed, as he lowers the blade, holding my breath when he places its keen edge against my thigh. Cas’s grip tightens on me, and my fingers clenches his as Prince draws the sharp edge across my skin, the flesh parting. A wave of euphoria washes over me, a deep groan leaving my lips.

My eyelids flutter closed as the sharp sting melts into bliss, all of my pain trickling away like the crimson droplets that drip down my thigh. The agony of my father’s death lessens a fraction, dulling as the blade gives me a release.

“You doing okay, Cinders?” Cas asks in my ear, his voice a husky whisper.

“Yes,” I murmur, and I mean it. The fog I’ve been lost in starts to recede from my mind, the agonising heartache decreasing. I moan when Prince cuts again, and this time, the bliss is sharper.

“Little sis,” Oct growls, rubbing his face over my breasts, his hot breath fanning across my nipples even through the tank top, and my breath catches when I feel Cas’s hard length pressing into my arse making my core ache.

Prince makes another cut, deeper this time, and my fingers grip Kit’s and Cas’s hands, my eyes rolling as pleasure explodes across my skin in tiny pinpricks. It’s never felt like this before. Yes, there’s always been the bliss of release when I cut myself, but never this desire, this desperate need. Maybe

it's because they're here with me, taking charge and administering the cuts rather than me having to face doing them alone, but whatever it is, I want to have them inside me at the same time.

"Please," I beg, my voice a pleading whine, my thighs clenching together.

"You want Cas inside you the next time I cut you, Sugar?" Prince asks in a low, rasping tone. I open my eyes, the thought of his suggestion flooding my core with so much heat that I can barely breathe. "You want us to help you forget?"

"Yes." I hold his stare, the others taking in sharp breaths as my answer settles over us. "I want you all."

"Take her shorts off, Oct," Prince commands, and fire races across my skin as Oct complies, hissing in pleased pain when the fabric touches the fresh wounds on my thigh. The pain keeps me in the here and now, keeps me in the present rather than thinking about the grief that looms at the edges of my mind.

"Fuck, she's already soaked for us," Oct comments, swiping his finger through my folds, and my hips jerk as pleasure fills my veins.

Oct grabs my thigh, avoiding my cuts and draping my leg over Cas's hips and Cas's hard length teases my entrance from behind, his piercing making me so fucking desperate.

"Please." I sound like a broken record, but I can't help it as I try to get Cas inside me, though Kit and Cas refuse to let go of my hands, so I can't guide him in.

"Shhhh," Prince coos, and I settle a little at his commanding tone. "Cas is going to push inside that sweet pussy at the same time that I'm going to give you your last cut." My body quivers at his words, my breath coming in short pants as I try to hold still.

"Good girl," Cas murmurs in my ear, and then he sucks in a breath between his teeth. "Fuck, Oct."

I look down to see Oct stroking Cas's dick, his hand wrapped around it as he pumps slowly up and down. Heat

sears my insides, leaving me full of such a powerful lust that I think I might explode.

“You like it when I touch him like this, don’t you, little sis?” Oct asks, and I glance up to see his pupils blown with just a fine ring of turquoise around the black.

“Yes,” I breathe out.

“You’ll like it even more when my dick rubs alongside his inside that sweet cunt of yours,” he adds in a low tone, and I swear my inner thighs grow slick with how fucking turned on I am.

A small voice tries to tell me that this is wrong, that I’m grieving and shouldn’t be seeking pleasure so soon, but I shake my head, ignoring the doubts and knowing that I need this reprieve, this reminder that I’m alive and have something worth fighting for if I’m to face what’s coming.

“You ready, Cas?” Prince asks, and Cas mumbles an affirmative against my neck, sucking the flesh there and making my nipples harden to fine points. “Now.”

Before Prince has finished speaking, Oct has lined Cas up and then he’s pushing inside me just as the fire of the last cut races across my skin.

It’s too much. Too much sensation for me to hold inside myself, and I shatter with a cry, stars bursting across my vision as I come so hard my entire body goes rigid.

“Fuck, Cinders,” Cas growls in my ear, fighting my clamping inner walls and pushing deeper. “You’re like a fucking vise around me right now.”

I can’t reply, because another wave hits me when Prince lowers his head and traces the fresh cuts with his tongue. It feels so fucking good, my mind fractured into a thousand pieces as I continue to climax.

“Little sis, you still with us?” Oct’s amused voice asks several moments later when my body has gone liquid, and I open bleary eyes to see him smiling at me.

“Shit,” I mumble, and they all laugh, Cas’s still very much hard dick jerking inside me. “That was...”

“We’re not done yet, beautiful. You said you wanted all of us,” Oct reminds me, his blue eyes full of a fire that I want to consume me. My heartbeat thuds inside my chest as I nod.

“I need all of you, Oct.” He gives me a heated look as he kneels up, his hand trailing down the valley between my breasts before tugging my tank top down to expose one rosy nipple.

Prince reaches into my bedside drawer, then hands Oct the bottle of lube that I keep stashed there, and he pumps some in his palm. My cheeks heat knowing that they must have seen my dildo in the drawer too. It’s a beautiful lilac and turquoise one called Wolfman as it’s, well, got a knot and all sorts of delicious ridges.

Oct pushes his shorts down, his long, hard length springing free. My mouth waters at the slight curve I know will have me screaming again in no time, all thoughts of my dildo forgotten.

Wrapping his hand around the base, he slides his fist up and down his dick, making it glisten as he coats it with lube.

“You just tightened around me, Cinders,” Cas murmurs in my ear, and I shiver when I hear the lust in his tone. “You enjoy watching him stroke his cock, seeing what you do to him, to us.”

My eyes dart up as my fingers are wrapped around a velvet cock, the ridge of metal on the underside letting me know that it’s Kit’s.

“You make us crazy with need, Pretty Thing,” he tells me, covering my hand with his and pumping both at the same time. Oct steals my attention back when he lies back down, his legs tangling with Cas’s and mine as he moves into the right position, his gaze locked on the place where Cas and I are joined.

A gasp falls from my lips when he pushes against my already full pussy, his hand guiding his hard length alongside Cas’s.

“Relax, little sis,” he instructs in a rasping tone. “That’s it, baby, let me in.”

I breathe through the sharp burn as he pushes inside, stretching me so full, my nails digging into Cas’s hand and my grip tightening around Kit’s dick the more Oct sinks inside me.

“Fuuuuck,” Cas moans behind me, and I want to say the same, but I’m so full, my nerves in shreds as Oct bottoms out and we lie there, connected. Sweat breaks out across my skin as they let me adjust to having them both inside me.

“You take them so beautifully, Sugar,” Prince praises, and I clench around Cas and Oct, who groans with pleasure. I twist my head to see Prince kneeling at the end of the bed with his fist around his rock-solid shaft. “Can you take Kit in that pretty mouth of yours too?”

My mind blanks, but then my hand is released from Kit’s cock, and someone grabs my hair in a fist and tips my head back. Kit is there, towering over me on his knees by my head, his dick right in front of my mouth.

I open for him, wanting to taste him again, and as he slides inside my mouth, his musky flavour bursting on my tongue, Oct and Cas move and I am lost to the sensation of having them all here, three of them inside me.

I let them use me, the pleasure they’re giving me in return the stuff of dreams as another orgasm fast approaches, my core tightening as my nerves tingle.

“She’s close,” Cas grits out, thrusting hard and making me moan around Kit’s dick in my mouth.

“So am I,” Oct replies through clenched teeth, his fingers digging into my hips as he matches Cas’s hard and fast pace.

Fingers find my swollen clit, and at the first brush, I’m spiralling, my pleasure exploding through me as I let out a muffled scream. Once again, my body tightens as sheer fucking bliss drags me under.

With my eyes closed in ecstasy, I hear the yells of Cas and then Oct, both thrusting so far inside me that another orgasm hits before the last has even finished. I can’t think, can’t

breathe, and can only feel as I'm consumed by rapture, my body clinging to them like it never wants to let go.

Kit pulls out of my mouth, his ladder piercing clinking against my teeth as he withdraws, still rock-solid. Opening my bleary eyes, I gasp when Oct and Cas withdraws, the rush of wetness between my thighs obscene, but before I can miss them too much, Kit is taking Oct's place, pulling me on top of him.

"I-I can't, Kit," I beg, my limbs refusing to obey as I drape myself over him, my knees either side of his hips, and he just chuckles darkly.

"You still have two brothers to please, Pretty Thing," he teases, lifting me slightly, and then he's at my soaked opening, thrusting inside me.

A pained moan escapes me at the same time as he groans the sexiest sound I've ever heard. His piercings drag along my inner walls and fuck, they're incredible. I lie against his chest, my face buried in the crook of his neck, my fingers digging into his pecs, unable to move much, but that doesn't seem to deter him. He grabs my hips and moves me up and down his shaft, waves of bliss flooding me once again.

I gasp when slick fingers toy with my puckered hole, one pressing inside me in a way that has my limbs trembling and excitement flooding my veins.

"Anyone ever fuck you here before, Sugar?" Prince's low drawl caresses my skin and I shake my head against Kit.

"N-no, n-never." I can only just get the words out, my body so full of exquisite pleasure that my brain is struggling to keep up.

"Good." He adds another finger, pumping them in and out in time with Kit thrusting his dick inside me, and another climax begins to build.

"Shhhit," I moan when Prince withdraws his fingers, the wide head of his lubed-up dick pressing against the tight ring of muscle.

Kit pauses, and a whine escapes my chest when Prince pushes past the barrier, slowly sinking inside me, inch by inch. Fuck, it hurts, but it feels so good at the same time too.

“Fuck, darlin’. Your ass is so fucking tight.” His fingers dig into my arse cheeks, his grip tightening the further he goes until his hips meet my backside, and we all take a moment to just breathe.

“I can feel him inside you,” Kit groans, one of his hands coming between us to rub around my clit in maddening circles. “They made you to take us, Ember.”

A deep moan leaves my throat when Prince withdraws, and I scream when he pumps back in, hard. Once again, I lose myself to the rhythm of our dance, my body a vessel to hold these gorgeous men. The noise of our fucking fills the room, accompanying our cries and heavy breathing.

“Come for us, Sugar,” Prince orders in a strained tone, his thrusts becoming harder and more erratic. His fingers tease along my thigh, finding the cuts and pressing down at the same moment that Kit pinches my clit, and I explode.

I scream their names, the waves of ecstasy drowning me in a way that leaves me boneless and utterly spent. They sink deeper inside me, both filling me up with their own climaxes as they groan my name while I’m lost in the bliss that’s holding me captive.

My body is boneless, weightless, and I barely make a noise as they leave it. The noise of the shower being turned on suddenly fills my ears, and then I’m lifted in muscular arms, but I can’t open my eyes to see who has hold of me, even when the warm water cascades over my skin.

I let them take care of me, my stepbrothers looking after me as though I’m the most precious thing in the world to them. Gentle fingers clean my cuts, and after drying me off, ointment and a bandage is placed over them.

Soon, I’m back in bed, the smell of fresh sheets enveloping me as I sink into the soft mattress. It dips behind and in front of me, the wild, floral scent of Oct and the lime, mimosa, and

cedar scent of Kit telling me it's the twins who have joined me.

“Sleep now, little sis. We'll keep you safe,” Oct whispers in my ear, and I drift off knowing that they will keep the nightmares away. That I can hide from my new reality for just a little bit longer.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“WAKE ME UP” BY TOMMEE PROFITT,
FLUERIE

OCT

My brother and I watch Ember as she sleeps, holding her soft body close to ours and breathing in her scent. I can still taste her skin on my tongue from our lovemaking earlier, the musk that I never want to forget. Fuck, I was worried that we were losing her for a moment; she was so lost to her grief that we had to keep her sedated for four fucking days. I hated every minute of seeing her in pain, and being unable to rip it out of her has been one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do.

“What do we do now?” I murmur into the darkness, my palm gliding down her side. The sun has set since we came to bed with her, and Prince and Cas went to sort some shit out, giving her more time before she has to face it all.

My arms tighten around her, pulling her even closer to me, her warmth filling my very soul. Kit grumbles then shuffles until he’s pressed against her back again.

“I don’t know,” he admits softly, his hand stroking down her arm. She sighs, and I could live off that sound, the contentment in it has my chest aching.

“Do you think we’ll have to...” I trail off, bile filling the back of my throat at having to go back to that. Back to the life we had before Ember came into it.

“I don’t know,” Kit grits out quietly, frustration lacing his tone, then heaving a sigh, he brushes a gentle kiss on Ember’s head. “Her dad was pretty loaded, so we should be alright.” He doesn’t sound convinced, and if I’m being truthful, neither am I. Odette spends money like it’s going out of fashion, and even we’ve gotten accustomed to a certain lifestyle, although Kit is right, Ember and her dad are—were—rich as fuck.

“I’m not sure I can after Ember,” I tell him, my voice barely a breath in the darkness. I can’t say what we’ve done, can’t let the disgust sink in any more than it already has. It coats me like a second skin, never washing away no matter how hard I scrub. Since meeting our new sister, the oppressive feeling of being suffocated by it has lessened, and I’d hoped that one day, I’d be able to take a full breath and not taste loathing.

“Me neither,” Kit answers, and we stay quiet, digesting what this means.

“We may not have a choice.”

And there it is, the thing that I’m most terrified about. It’s not like it was before, where it was just us and our rapidly growing aversion to the parties. The idea of Ember finding out, of hurting her in that way... My stomach churns, and I bury my face in her hair, breathing her in to calm my racing heartbeat.

Kit breathes out heavily. “Don’t worry about it now, Oct. We don’t even know if it will be something we’ll have to do again.”

But my dry mouth and constricted throat won’t listen, and as we go back to silence, I can’t help wondering what will happen next. I may have only known Ember in real life for less than two weeks, but I know I can’t be without her. The last four days have shown me that. We almost went out of our goddamn minds.

She’s essential to me, to us, as much as the air that fills our lungs.

And I won’t let Odette take that away.

“HURTS LIKE HELL” BY FLEURIE, TOMMEE PROFITT

PRINCE

Sick.

I feel fucking sick to my stomach, and no amount of deep breathing can calm the roiling of the organ. History is repeating itself, for a third time, and the churning in my gut tells me that something is not right. It hasn't been right for a long fucking time and I've been too cowardly to look too closely.

I stare at the screen on my laptop, at the weather reports from the Cayman Islands for the past three weeks, including the day that Richard Everly went fishing.

No reported swells or unusual sea activity aside from the one incident that took Ember's dad's life. The boat returned with no damage and all the rest of the crew were fine.

My phone vibrates on the desk next to me, and seeing the caller ID, I pick it up and bring it to my ear.

“Thank you for returning my call. I hear you can unearth secrets that people want to keep buried?” I say into the device, my tone calm and collected even though my pulse is thundering in my ears.

“We can do anything, Prince, or should I say, Eugene Brown. The Fallen have unlimited reach. It just depends on if you can pay the price.”

A favour. That's the price for the help of The Fallen. You will owe them a favour that they will collect at the time and place of their choosing. It could be to gather intel. It could be murder.

I heave a heavy sigh, looking out into the darkness of the night, the moon shining bright as I think about how close we came to losing her, our sister.

Our soulmate.

“You have yourself a deal, Lucifer. We’ll owe you whatever you need. In exchange—”

“In exchange, we will find out whether your mother, one Odette Everly, killed Richard Everly, Brant Johnson, and Michael Scott.”

Then the line goes dead. Hearing someone say my suspicions out loud is like a fist to the gut, my eyes going up, looking heavenward as a small measure of relief makes my muscles weak, but at the same time, I can’t breathe for a second, the guilt making my chest tighten until I want to claw at my insides. It feels like I’ve been harboring these twisted thoughts for years, my dark theories kept to myself as I protect my brothers from my mother’s heinous crimes.

A knock at my door has me gasping a breath, oxygen rushing into my lungs and leaving me dizzy.

“Prince?” Cas’s voice comes through the wood, and I have to clench my jaw to stop the bitter bile that hits the back of my throat from spilling. I’ve kept so much from them, from my brothers, taking on the mantle of protector and keeping my suspicions to myself. It would hurt them if they found out, and I’ve had no concrete evidence to support the theories I have about my mom. “You coming down for something to eat?”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” I reply, no hint of the turmoil that plagues my soul in my voice. I’ll tell them my thoughts when Lucifer gets back to me, but until then, I’ll let them live in ignorance for a bit longer. It’s kinder this way.

I close my eyes as I listen to his steps getting further away. My hands clench into fists, and not for the first time, I hate the universe for giving me a mother who is no mother at all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“LIFTS” BY LIA MARIE JOHNSON

EMBER

When I wake up, the soft light of predawn casts a golden glow across my room, coating everything in a pale, washed-out light. I shift in my bed, my body aching but also content, and matching grumbles sound either side of me.

“Little sis, it’s too damn early,” Oct complains in a voice rough with sleep. Then he pulls me closer to him, his feverish body pressed against mine, and I remember with a flash of heat that we’re both naked.

I take a deep inhale of him, skirting my lips over the skin of his throat and flicking my tongue out to taste him. He tastes like lazy days spent under the sun, like the salt that lines your lips after being in the sea.

“Is it?” I ask, my voice low and my fingers aching to touch him. I trace them down his skin, the warmth from him burning as he gives a shuddering exhale. Kit presses against my back, his soft lips teasing that place between my neck and shoulder. A small whine leaves my throat as I press my arse back into him, and he growls when I make contact with his hard-on.

“You must be sore,” he comments, his palm tracing down my front, over my breast, and heading towards the apex of my thighs.

“I don’t care,” I reply in a breathy plea, tangling my fingers in Oct’s hair and pulling his face closer to mine.

“I never used to be a morning person,” Oct murmurs against my lips, his hand exploring my body, cupping my breast and his thumb teasing my nipple. “But I’m not hating them as much anymore.”

His lips close the miniscule distance between us, and I sigh, my muscles relaxing as he kisses me. It’s everything I need right now; fun and bright like days spent on the beach, and I tug him closer, needing more of his light.

I’m not ready to face the day yet. I need to hide away a little while longer. The warmth at my back leaves, and I make a sound of protest that Oct swallows.

“Shhh, just getting the lube, baby,” Kit says behind me. Oct keeps kissing me, the sound of the bottle cap loud in the early morning silence.

Slicked fingers play with my folds, and although there’s soreness, I meant what I said. I don’t care, I’ll welcome this pain. It’ll remind me that I’m here and alive.

The fingers disappear a moment later, then Oct is pulling my leg over his hip and thrusting inside me. I gasp at the burn, but his lips refuse to release me. He matches the thrust of his hips with that of his tongue until my pain has become pleasure, and my body welcomes him like he was always meant to be inside me.

“Kit,” I moan when Oct finally allows me to take a breath. I need him too, I need them both.

“I’m here, baby,” he assures me, pressing up against my back. Oct pauses in his movements, allowing Kit to push in alongside him, and the fullness of having them both inside my pussy is almost too much. It’s not as sharp as the night before, my body already used to having two cocks inside me at the same time, craving it. Sweat dots my skin, our legs tangled together as they hold still, giving me time to adjust.

“You’re doing so well, little sis,” Oct praises, his fingers finding my clit and rubbing circles on it. The rush of wetness

that he encourages with his touch allows Kit to squeeze in the final few inches, and they pause once more, allowing me to get used to being filled by them.

“I love having you both inside me,” I tell them, my voice strained as I wiggle my hips, begging them to move. “I love feeling you so close.”

Oct claims my lips again as Kit moves, and then they both do, never leaving me empty, their hands worshipping me as they thrust slow and deep.

“I never want to be without you, little sis,” Oct confesses against my lips as Kit kisses and sucks at my neck. Shivers cascade across my skin, leaving me gasping for breath and chasing a release so close that I can almost taste it.

“You belong to us, Ember,” Kit adds, his voice thick with lust. His fingers dig into my hip possessively, sharp pin pricks of pain emanating from each of his fingers, his other hand snaking around and grasping my throat. “You. Are. Ours.” He punctuates each word with a thrust of his hips, sending me spinning closer to an edge that I plan to leap off.

“And you’re fucking mine,” I growl out, a surge of possessiveness hitting me full force. One of my hands grabs Kit’s forearm while the other pulls Oct back to my lips by his hair, and they both growl as my inner walls tighten around them.

“Come for us, show us we own every fucking inch of you,” Kit commands, his grip on my throat tightening, almost cutting off my air supply. It’s enough pain to have me clamping around them both, my body going rigid as my orgasm rips through me, dragging them both with me as they thrust hard and fill me with their pleasure.

“Fuck, little sis,” Oct rasps, and my eyelashes flutter when he presses his forehead to mine. “You’re fucking perfect, you know that?”

“The perfect sister for your big brothers,” Kit adds, and my pussy walls tighten at his dirty talk, Oct cursing him out as I tighten around them again. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Reluctantly, we untangle ourselves, and I miss them immediately as we leave the bed. My arms wrap around myself as the cool air hits me, but it's the returning coldness in my heart that I'm trying to warm up.

"I know, baby, but you have to face the world sometime," Oct says gently, clearly seeing the way my face falls as we stand slightly apart. He pulls me to him and wraps his arms around me, uncaring that I'm covered in sweat and that their cum drips down my inner thighs.

"I know." I sigh and hug him back, trying to fight the pain behind my eyes. I don't want to cry anymore, I've been crying so much lately. "I just wish it could go back to before, when my father wasn't..." I gulp, the lump in my throat too large to say the word. I have so many regrets when it comes to my father. I wish I hadn't let him distance himself so much over the past few years.

"Me too, Pretty Thing." Kit murmurs, coming around and pressing himself up against me so that I'm once again sandwiched between them both. My body relaxes, my pulse quieting as they hold me, not rushing me to do what I know I have to at some point.

"Let's do this then," I huff after several moments, pulling away from both of them. That first step is like walking out into a freezing day and knowing you don't have enough layers on. Something must show on my face, because they're instantly back at my side, Kit leading the way as they pull me towards the shower.

Warmth fills my chest at how caring they are, knowing when I need them without me uttering a single word.

After we all shower, they head back to their rooms via the balcony, and I'm tugging on an oversized jumper that I'm wearing with leggings—it's all about the comfort clothes today—when there's a light knock at my door.

"Come in," I call out, a smile pulling my lips upwards when Cas steps into the room, looking just as gorgeous as the first time I saw him, dressed in stonewash jeans and a fitted

long-sleeved henley. *Your dad was alive then.* My eyes suddenly fill, and he's next to me in a second.

"I would have stayed downstairs if I'd known I was gonna make you cry, Cinders," he jokes, pulling me in for a hug. I take a gulping breath, wrapping my arms around his waist and breathing him in, his caramel apple scent calming my aching heart a little.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, hot tears leaving their mark down my cheek as I rest it against his firm pec. The salt of my sadness drips onto my lips, and I fucking loathe it. "It just feels like everyone always leaves me eventually, and I'm destined to always be alone." The truth, my greatest fear, spills out from me, though I shouldn't be surprised that it's Cas I'm confessing it. He just has a way of making me able to tell him anything and everything.

"Firstly, we aren't going anywhere. We will never leave you, Ember, I swear on my very soul you have us for life." His grip tightens, like he's assuring me with his body as well that he will always be here. "And secondly, there's no need to apologize, baby. Grief can hit you that way. It's all sharp edges at the moment, cutting and painful, but like a stone you hold every day, it'll smooth over time; never quite going away, always there, but hurting less."

I chuckle, leaning my face back so I can look up at him. "Not just a pretty face then, huh?"

His lips tug up into a smile that makes my broken heart ache. It's so understanding and gentle, like a warm blanket on a cold day that just feels right and so comforting you want to sink into it.

"You think I'm pretty, Little Cinders?" My grin widens, and it feels so nice to smile.

"I think that you're one of the most gorgeous men I've ever met," I tell him, going on my tiptoes and pressing my lips against his.

His soft exhale falls across my lips, his tongue immediately seeking entry which I gladly give him. His kiss is

gentle, yet tells me more than words could ever say. It tells me how worried he's been, how relieved he is that I'm in his arms, and that he'll always be here waiting for me.

“Just one and not *the* most gorgeous?” he teases as he pulls away, one perfect brow raised, his kiss-reddened lips smirking. I love that he's trying to distract me from my grief, trying to make me smile.

“Well, your brothers make up the other three, and as it's clear I refuse to choose, you'll just have to share the title with them.” His grin gets wider at my words.

“I knew you were going to be perfect for us from the first moment I saw your picture,” he tells me, his hand coming up to brush some hair behind my ear.

“And how long ago was that, pray tell?” I ask, giggling when his ears colour. A part of me is annoyed that they knew about me long before I knew about them, about Odette, but I guess it doesn't matter anymore. They're all I have left now. My nostrils flare as I take a measured inhale, trying to keep the sadness at bay.

“Hey, what thought made you sad so suddenly?” Cas asks, his forehead creased, and I'm reminded of the time in the car when he told me his story.

“I was just thinking that you guys and Odette are all I have left now.”

“And that made you sad?” I don't miss the hurt that makes his copper eyes flash, and I grasp his hand, bringing it up to my cheek.

“No, not like that, Cas,” I rush out, begging him with my eyes to understand. “I'd be adrift without you guys.” The frown between his eyes smooths a little as I continue. “It reminded me of what I've lost. That I'm now an o-orphan.” Tears blur my vision again as my chin wobbles, but I'm powerless against this grief, so I can't stop them from falling.

“Fuck, baby. I shouldn't have—” He presses his lips to my forehead and lets me quietly sob into his chest. “At least you're in good company.”

“I’m not sure that makes me feel any better,” I reply, wiping my eyes with my sleeve.

“Maybe not, but at least you know we understand you on a level that few will, Cinders.” He has a point, and I snuggle into him until my stomach gives an almighty rumble. “Shit, you haven’t eaten in forever, and here I was coming to get you for breakfast and getting distracted.”

“I could eat.” I laugh, and he turns us towards the door. “How did I not starve whilst I was out?”

He winces, rubbing the back of his neck with the hand that isn’t holding me around my waist. “Ah, the doctor set you up on a drip. We’d removed it before the last time you woke up. Prince was determined to bring you back to us.” I frown, having no recollection of a drip, although I’m grateful they did because I’d be in a terrible state if I had no fluids. “The doc also said to take it easy,” he continues, walking us out of the door and towards the stairs. He keeps a firm grip on me, and I’m not complaining because, in all honesty, I do feel a little weak. “Not let you eat too much in one go, that sort of thing. He’s coming back later to check on you, if that’s okay?”

“Sure,” I answer, distracted as I focus on each step. There’s a slight tremor in my limbs, and it pisses me off. Cas must notice it too, because before we’re even a quarter of the way down, he sweeps me into his arms, carrying me bridal style. “Cas! I can walk!”

“Maybe, Cinders,” he replies, walking down the stairs as if I weigh nothing. “But that doesn’t mean I have to let you, and I’m feeling particularly caveman today.”

Chuckling and liking being in his arms too much to protest further, I wrap my arms around his powerful neck before snuggling closer the rest of the way to the dining room, the twins arriving at the top of the staircase and following behind us. I squash down the guilt that tries to tell me I shouldn’t be laughing, shouldn’t be smiling so soon after losing my dad. I know from before with Mum how easily that guilt can settle and turn everything dark and dismal.

“Hey there, Sugar,” Prince drawls as we enter, and I avoid looking at the head of the table, the place where my father always used to sit.

“Hi,” I say back, Cas setting me down in the empty chair between them, but I get back up, climbing into Prince’s lap instead. “You look tired, Prince.” I cup his cheek, the rough stubble that has grown there over the past few days tickling my palm. “Though I like the new look.”

He grins at me, dipping his head until his mouth is next to my ear. “I bet it would feel good between those gorgeous thighs of yours.” My breath hitches, my core heating at his words, even as a pulse of soreness makes me wiggle in his lap. “Those boys made you sore this morning after yesterday, huh?”

He shoots the twins a scowl, and I pull his gaze back to me, kissing him softly on the lips.

“I wanted them to, Prince,” I tell him, and he studies my face, giving me a nod when he can see that I’m telling the truth. My stomach growls again, loud enough for them all to hear, and chuckles ring out across the room.

“Let’s get you something to eat, Sugar.”

After breakfast, which consisted of a delicious ham, cheese, and veggie omelette and some kind of protein shake that Cas had organised, I sit back in Prince’s lap, full and still ignoring the empty chair at the top of the table.

“We don’t have classes today, do we?” I ask, not sure I’d be able to face that yet, and Prince pulls me closer to him. I inhale his scent of rum and leather, loving the way they each smell different but all of them calming me, nonetheless.

“No, Sugar, but...” he trails off, and suddenly my calm evaporates like steam from a kettle.

“But what?” My heart pounds inside my chest, my fingers clenching and unclenching as I wait to hear what he says.

He sighs, his chest moving up and down against me. “Odette returns today, and I’m sure she’ll want to talk about funeral arrangements—”

Before he can finish his sentence, the sound of the front door opening and closing reaches us. Wide-eyed, I clutch at Prince's arms around me, trying to sink back into him as her heels tap a quick beat on the marble floor, getting louder as she clearly heads towards us.

My heart seems to beat in time with her fast pace, and I don't realise that I'm panting shallow breaths until Prince whispers, "Breathe, Sugar." It's firm enough that my body obeys and helps calm my racing heart a little.

The door to the dining room is thrown open, and I flinch when she stares straight at me, looking...perfect.

I don't know what I expected; her dressed in black maybe, or perhaps even dark circles under her eyes. Instead, she's wearing a peach pantsuit, her makeup flawless, hair falling around her shoulders in beautiful waves, and she's positively fucking glowing.

Part of me feels like I should move off Prince, that even though Odette knows about the relationship I share with the guys, I should maybe hide it from her like before. But I just don't have the energy to move, to deny the comfort that Prince is giving me right now.

"Oh, Ember, honey," she says, her face creasing a little, but I distrust the expression, my eyes narrowing as I continue to stare at her. "I'm so sorry."

There's not even a stammered word or a hiccup. Nothing to show the sadness of a wife who has just lost her husband.

"Are you not sad?" The words slip past my lips before I can stop them, and I feel Prince stiffen underneath me, but my focus is all on Odette, my stepmother. Ex-stepmother now I suppose.

A flash of annoyance crosses her stunning features, her lips tightening into a flat line before she schools her face into the picture of confusion.

"Why would you say such a thing to me?" she asks, her tone wounded, but my brows draw closer, trying to work out if she's sincere or not.

“You don’t look sad,” I tell her honestly, and her mouth opens and closes like a fish. I have the sudden urge to laugh and have to bite my lips in order to hold the sound in. Nothing about this is funny, and I worry if I let the laughter fall, it will quickly turn into sobs.

“What are you talking about?” She storms around the table, and my heart beats faster at the rage in her eyes. “I just lost my husband, you vile child, how dare you say I’m not sad. I’m devastated!”

I see the guys flinch at her angry tone, and my pulse rushes in my ears, but I still can’t quite believe what she’s trying to sell. There’s something...fake about it all, like she’s going through the motions because that’s what is expected of her.

“You don’t look devasta—” My head whips to the side before the word has left my mouth, and I blink, my sight wobbling as pain flares in my cheek.

Prince has pulled me closer, angling my body away, and I turn my head back around to see Odette being held by Cas, his eyes full of copper fire as he looks at my cheek.

My tongue darts out and copper fills my mouth, and when I swipe my hand across my lip, a smear of blood decorates my skin.

“You touch her again, Odette, and I will not be held responsible for my actions,” Cas growls out, and she spins in his arms, burying her face into his chest and sobbing loudly. He holds his hands away, then awkwardly embraces her, his jaw clenching, his head held up and away like he’d rather be anywhere else.

My chest burns, and I clench my teeth at them. I fucking loathe seeing her in his arms, arms that belong to me. I don’t care that she’s his stepmother, something inside me roars at the way she curves into him.

“Easy, Sugar,” Prince says, his heart beating so fast that it pulses into my back. “Let’s just all calm down.”

“She. Fucking. Slapped. Me.” I can barely get the words out, my hands clenching grabbing onto his forearms as I pull

against his hold, my body trying to get to her to rip her off my man. I struggle to contain the rage I feel towards this woman, my vision washing in shades of red. I know that it's not fully justified, that perhaps some part of me blames her for my father's death simply because she was there and I wasn't.

"I know, Sugar, and she will apologise for that, won't you, Odette?" Prince's voice is deadly calm, and it helps to quieten the anger inside me, enough so that I can think clearly again.

She snuffles, twisting to face me, but is still much too close to Cas for my liking. To be fair to him, he lets go of her the moment she turns, but he still looks like he's ready to haul her back if she tries anything again.

She blinks, and I notice that there's barely a trace of tears on her cheeks. "I shouldn't have hit you, Ember. I'm sorry. It's been very trying since your father disappeared, and then when his body washed up..." Her lip trembles, but I can't focus on her, my mind conjuring up images of my father, bloated and ravaged by the sea.

"Sugar? Ember, baby," Prince's voice sounds so far away, and it's as if the world rushes back in, bile filling my throat, and Prince is shaking me, my blurry vision full of emeralds. He must have stood up and turned me around at some point, but I don't remember when.

"Prince." My voice cracks, and he pulls me to him, wrapping me up in his strength and whispering reassurances in my ear. I focus on inhaling and exhaling, letting his spiced rum scent fill me until my vision stops wavering and the room stops spinning.

"What's wrong with her?" I hear Odette ask, her tone sounding more disgusted than worried, but I can't find it in me to care as I focus on Prince's heartbeat underneath my cheek, trying to get my lungs to follow his and allow oxygen to keep flowing.

"It's what grief looks like, Odette, or have you forgotten already?" I've never heard Kit so scathing before, and there's a touch on my shoulder, the warmth on my other side telling me that Oct is here too.

“We’ve got you, little sis,” Oct whispers, stroking my hair.

“Just leave, Odette,” I hear Cas say, and then he’s at my back, his palm gliding up and down, all of them grounding me with their soft touches.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“CARRY YOU” BY RUELLE

EMBER

After Odette leaves, I feel deflated and wrung out, and I’ve got the rest of the day to face yet. I don’t even have the energy to move right now as I lean against Prince and let him hold me up.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, still pressed against Prince, the others hovering around us.

“Don’t you dare apologize, Sugar,” Prince growls, pulling me away from him enough so that he can stare into my eyes. His swirl with emerald fire, the sight captivating and lending me strength. “She had no fucking right to slap you.” His nostrils flare, his jaw tight under the stubble, and I reach up to cup his face.

“But what I said, it was uncalled for. People grieve differently, and perhaps her way is to dress normally, act normally.” He doesn’t look convinced, his brows dipped low, and my gut swirls with unease. Why would he think that she’s being false in her grief, just like I accused her of? Maybe I was right, maybe she is faking it? “I should probably say sorry to her.”

“Why don’t you give it a bit of time for you both to calm down?” Cas suggests, pressing a kiss to my temple. My eyelids close briefly as I absorb the gesture, my lungs taking a deep inhale, their mixed scents calming me further.

“But there are things that need organising, and I’ve spent too long already hiding from the world,” I tell him, taking another deep inhale before stepping away from them. “Will you come with me?”

“Of course, little sis,” Oct says, grasping my hand. “We will always have your back.” Warmth fills me up, and I manage a smile, wincing as my cheek aches.

“We should get something cold on your cheek, Cinders,” Cas chides, stepping towards me, but I’m shaking my head.

“It’s fine, Cas. Let’s find Odette and clear the air.” I hate the bad feeling that covers my skin, sticking to me like those muggy days when we’re due a thunderstorm that just won’t come.

We leave the dining room, and after asking Reginald if he’s seen Odette, he takes us to my father’s office. What was his office, I guess. A lump forms in my throat as we stand outside, the door slightly ajar. Taking a deep breath and blinking back tears, I push the door open the rest of the way and stride inside.

“Ember,” Odette utters, rising from behind my father’s desk, papers strewn across the surface. Her eyes are wide, like she didn’t expect to see me so soon, and the way she steps in front of the desk, blocking my view of what the papers might say, has alarm bells ringing in my head. Regardless, I should at least try to make amends, out of respect for my father, if nothing else. He did marry her after all.

“I’m sorry I spoke out of turn, Odette. We all deal with grief differently, it wasn’t my place to judge.” Her features soften as she comes towards me, her arms out. My heart races, but I’m determined to become the girl I’d always wanted to be but was too scared to embrace. If nothing else, my father’s death has taught me that life is too short to be anything other than your truest self. “But you shouldn’t have hit me, that wasn’t okay.”

Her arms drop just as she reaches me, the side of her face twitching, and I wonder if anyone has ever stood up to her before. Taking another deep inhale, and trying not to focus on

the woodsy smell that reminds me of my dad, I step closer to her, taking her hands in mine. They're cold, and something about holding them makes my teeth want to grind together, but I ignore it in a bid to settle the bad air.

"I'm sorry I struck out, Ember, honey," she says after a moment, squeezing my hands in hers, exactly like she did that day not so long ago when I first met her. "It's just been so hard, what with the accident and then having to deal with getting him flown back over."

Tears make my vision swim, and I lick my lips, attempting to hold them back. I don't want to cry in front of her, something telling me to save it for when I'm with the guys.

"I—I get that, and I'm here t—to help with any preparations," I stutter, the presence at my back from my stepbrothers giving me strength.

"Oh, that's all been taken care of, honey. The funeral is tomorrow. He'll be buried next to your mother, as per his wishes." Her lips twist slightly at the last part, like she's annoyed by that, but it's gone too quickly for me to digest it.

"T—tomorrow?" I swallow hard, the action painful as I fight against the lump that's getting bigger, threatening to cut off my air supply. She gives my hands a final squeeze before letting go, and instead of being reassuring, the gesture makes me wince as pain shoots up my arms.

"Yes, well, it's best to get these sorts of things out the way, don't you think?" She looks at me with raised brows, her eyes saying that I'm making something out of nothing.

"O—of course," I reply, my mind spinning with this new bombshell. "Where is the w—wake?"

"We're having that here, honey, and the chef has his instructions. I've got everything sorted so you don't need to worry about a thing."

t's fucking freezing when we leave for the funeral the next morning, and as I glance up at the sky, there's something about it that feels like snow is coming, even though it is technically spring. English weather at its finest, I suppose. I quite like it, as I feel maybe it would be harder to bury him if it was bright and sunny outside.

The drive to the church is quiet, Odette having taken her own car and the guys coming with me in the Bentley. She frowned when they told her they weren't leaving me, but said nothing.

All too soon the door is being opened, letting in a blast of cold air that has my skin breaking out into goosebumps underneath my black dress and coat.

"It's time, Sugar," Prince tells me quietly from his seat next to mine, and I blink, having lost the time it took to get here, stuck in thoughts of what I have to face today.

Cas is standing at the open door, holding his hand out, and I take it, grateful for the warm touch. I'm so cold, so numb, like this isn't happening to me at all. Like today isn't the day I bury my father.

"Just breathe, Cinders," Cas whispers, his face filling my watery vision, and I take a huge, gasping inhale, the freezing air filling my lungs. "That's it. We're here, you are not alone."

I can't speak, can't get my mouth to form words, so I nod, wrapping my arm around his firm bicep and letting him lead me into the old church. I'm not sure why we're holding a service here. Dad wasn't religious at all, but I guess Odette thought it was the right thing to do, and by the way the place is already three-quarters filled, it seems that it was a good call.

I avoid everyone's eyes, recognising a few faces as my father's business associates, but I soon stare straight ahead, at the gleaming wooden coffin with white lilies resting on the top. My nose wrinkles with the pungent scent of them. I've always hated lilies.

My breath catches when a large photograph of him catches my eye, his face creased in a smile, a beaming Odette on his

arm. I wonder briefly why she chose that picture and not one of him alone, but then Cas leads me into the front pew, Prince at my back and the twins following us in.

Odette sits on the other side of Cas, looking every inch the glamorous widow. A fitted black jacket showcases her generous curves, with a calf-length skirt, her hair perfectly coiled with a small black hat perched on top, a piece of black net covering her face.

She knows how to put on a show.

The bitchy thought floats through my mind, especially when she dabs at the corner of her eye with a small white handkerchief, though not a tear is in sight.

The ceremony passes by in a blur, various people who seemed to know my father extolling his virtues, and soon we're standing at the doorway, accepting people's condolences and handshakes.

The woodland burial site is a short drive away, and it feels as though I'm blinking and then I'm standing in front of that same oak tree I stood under five years ago, the soil exposed in a tear in the earth that matches that of my heart. My mum's headstone sits to the right of the gaping hole, looking weathered and with snowdrops growing at its base.

Others file in around us, the vicar saying more words that fly through my mind as I watch them lower his coffin into the ground.

At least he's next to her.

Tears fill my eyes when we're called to put a handful of soil on the coffin. Mine lands with a thud, sounding like a door slamming shut, leaving me out, lost in the wilderness.

Then I'm standing there with my guys, snowflakes drifting around us.

"We should get back, Sugar," Prince murmurs in my ear as a warm coat is draped over my shoulders, engulfing me in his spiced rum and leather scent. "You're freezing."

I didn't realise how cold I was until that moment, my body relaxing with the heat from his body lingering in the garment.

“Let's go home, little sis,” Oct adds, placing a kiss on the top of my head before taking my frozen hand in his and rubbing it. Warmth emanates from his touch, breathing life back into my limbs.

My eyelids drift shut, the tears frozen on my cheeks.

Goodbye, Dad.

Then I open my eyes, curling my fingers around Oct's and letting them lead me away, the snow continuing to drift around us before settling on the ground and covering my heartache in shades of white.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“SACRED OF THE DARK” BY LI WAYNE, TY
DOLLAR \$IGN, XXXTENTACION

CAS

We spend the next few days holding Ember, trying to get her to eat and drink, but it’s like she’s not there, and I know my brothers are as worried as I am to see how blank her blue eyes are, how she appears to just be going through the motions of living.

We’re sitting in the living room, Prince and I on either side of her, Oct at her feet, and Kit off making something for her in the kitchen when the door opens with a slam. We all flinch, and Odette strides in, her usual pantsuit pressed to perfection, make-up on point, and sky-high heels sinking into the carpet.

“The lawyer will be here in a minute to talk over the will,” she announces, looking at Ember between us.

“W–will?” Ember asks, her voice quiet and a little scratchy from disuse. Her face crinkles, and she looks far too fucking pale for my liking. I tuck her closer into me, my arm around her shoulders, and a warmth unfurls within me when she nestles into my side without question. Odette’s nose wrinkles as she looks at us, but I couldn’t give a fuck. Ember is ours and she can’t take her away from us.

“Yes, your father’s will,” Odette states, but her condescending tone has my hackles rising, a growl trapped in the back of my throat. Fuck, I hate not being able to tell her to

fuck off, but everything is so up in the air right now that we dare not piss her off in case it backfires on us or Ember.

“Oh, okay,” Ember replies, still in that quiet voice. My nostrils flare, I hate how small she sounds, like she’s missing a vital part of herself.

“We’ll be there,” Prince announces, and Odette’s gaze snaps to him. It’s hard to read her expression, which may be on account of all the botox or because she is a master fucking manipulator.

“Fine. We’ll be in the study.” She turns on her heel and strides out, all of us breathing out a breath as she takes some of the tension with her. Prince kneels in front of Ember, taking her hand in his and ducking his head to catch her eyes.

“We’ll be beside you, Sugar, if that’s what you want?”

“Yes, please.” She blinks down at him, her words like a plea.

“Always, Cinders. No please required,” I tell her, kissing the top of her head and inhaling her incredible scent. It makes me think that anything is possible, as long as she’s there, which I know sounds fucking stupid, but there it is.

We hear the doorbell a moment later, then the indistinct murmur of Reginald and another male voice. Their footsteps echo toward the study, and Ember straightens, pulling out of my grip so she can stand. I miss her warmth immediately, my hand twitching with the need to pull her back to me.

I get up too, Prince and Oct following. Then Kit walks in, sees us all standing there, and sets the snacks he brought in aside. “What’s up?” he asks softly, his gaze darting over us, his brows furrowed.

“We’re going to the study to hear Richard’s Will,” I tell him, my eyes trained on Ember as she flinches. He nods, and I hold out my hand to her, waiting as she takes a deep, shaking inhale. Finally, she takes my hand, hers slightly shaking.

“It’ll be okay, Sugar,” Prince reassures her, and I watch as her shoulders rise and fall with her slow inhale and long exhale.

Then we walk out of the room, down to the study, and can hear Odette's flirtatious laughter along with a deep male baritone. Ember stiffens when Odette giggles again, and I wince, knowing what she's thinking. How can she laugh so soon after losing her husband? It's the same thing I thought after my dad died. Odette never seems to take that long to grieve before moving on to her next conquest. I shake the dark thoughts from my head, focusing on Ember beside me.

"We're here with you, right beside you," I whisper, stepping forward and pushing the door open further, Ember's hand clasped in mine.

They both glance up as we step in, the man's cheeks flushing like he's been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Given how close Odette is sitting to him, that's not far off.

"Ember, honey," Odette gushes, getting up and rushing to Ember, who freezes when Odette wraps her arms around her in an embrace. I keep hold of Ember's hand, rubbing her knuckles with the pad of my thumb in reassurance. "Mr Wilcox, this is Ember, Robert's daughter, and these are my stepsons."

The man, Mr Wilcox, stands before tugging his tailored suit jacket down and striding over to us as Odette finally releases Ember. I don't miss the flash of a gold wedding band on his ring finger. Fucking dick, flirting while his wife is probably at home.

"Miss Everly, I'm so sorry for your loss. Your father was a great man," he says, and to give him some credit, he looks sincere, taking Ember's free hand in both of his in a comforting gesture.

"T-thank you," she mumbles, blinking rapidly, and I want to punch his posh asshole face for making her sad again.

"Shall we?" he asks, letting go of her hand and walking over to sit behind the desk. I feel Ember bristle, and I must admit, it's forward of him to take her father's chair, but I ignore my ire and lead her to the chair next to Odette, the others coming to form a wall around her. "Now, let's begin."

“THE OTHER SIDE” BY RUELLE

EMBER

I sit there, stunned as the solicitor’s words ring in my ear.

Destitute.

That’s what he told us, that my father had debts we didn’t know about, that his business interests and investments had failed, and that all we had left was the house, which we couldn’t afford to keep up now that he’s gone. Apparently, even his life insurance didn’t pay out enough.

“Cinders?” Cas’s soft voice interrupts the maelstrom swirling inside me, and I look at him, away from my father’s signet ring in my palm, the only thing that he left me, blinking as if coming awake from a deep sleep.

“What are we going to do, Cas?” Tears fill my eyes, and I’m so fucking sick of crying, but I just feel so lost and unsure.

“It’ll be fine, Sugar,” Prince says from my other side, and I twist to see him crouching down, his face level with mine. “We’ll make sure nothing bad happens to you, okay?”

I slowly nod, but I just can’t see how he’s going to keep that promise. He and his brothers are as unprepared for the real world as I am. I suppose we could all get jobs somehow, move into a smaller place maybe, but somehow, I don’t think Odette would agree, and the idea of living with her in a place where I could run into her at any moment leaves me feeling uneasy.

My chest tightens at the thought of having to give up Goldsmiths. Getting my art degree has been the only thing to keep me going these past few years. I’m not sure who I am without it.

“Well.” Odette’s sharp tone makes me flinch, and I glance away from Prince to see that she’s standing in the doorway, having seen the solicitor out. “Looks like not only have I been made a widow again, but I’ve been saddled with another child to look after and no money to do it with.” My entire body goes ice-cold at her harsh words, at how I’ve gone from being loved to a burden.

“Odette!” Prince growls, springing up and striding towards her, his body bristling with anger. Odette rubs her face, all the tight anger draining from her and leaving her sagging against the doorframe.

“I—I’m sorry, Ember, honey. I didn’t mean it to sound like that. I just don’t know what we’re going to do. We’ll have to let go of all the staff, perhaps even move, and we’d only just got settled. I hardly know a soul here either, so have no one to turn to.”

“I can help around the house,” I offer quietly, and she looks at me, relief making her eyes shine.

“Oh, would you? It’ll be a lot to take on, but economies have to be made, and until I can work out if we can stay here or not, that would be such a help, Ember, honey.” She comes towards me, pulling me up out of my chair and into a hug. My arms are slow to wrap around her, the ring digging into my clenched fist, her earlier words still stinging like a paper cut, but eventually, I hug her back. “I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

The guys all freeze at that, a wary look passing between them behind her back, and my brows dip as I try to work out what it means. Before I can ask though, Odette pulls away, cupping my cheek in her palm, forcing my attention to her. Her hand is icy, and unlike when one of my stepbrothers does it, I don’t feel comforted by the touch.

“Why don’t you all go back to watching your film? I’ve some calls to make, and then I’ll have to let the staff know of their termination. It’ll be best if I do that without an audience.” She gives me a small smile, then releases me to walk around the desk and sit in my father’s chair.

Not his anymore.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“LOST IT ALL” BY JILL ANDREWS

ODETTE

“P rince, darling. A word.”

My son, the only one of them who is my blood, pauses. Then with a knot in the back of his jaw, he ushers the others out before closing the door behind them. I see the flash of a scowl on his handsome face when he turns to face me, a face that’s served me and the rest of our ragtag family well so many times before. I’ve been lucky that all my stepchildren, even the newest, are all fantastic-looking.

“Yes, Odette?” His tone is wary, his beautiful face now a blank mask, and it irks me.

I sigh. “Why do you never call me mother? I gave birth to you after all.” The lines around his eyes tighten, his upper lip curling ever so slightly, and I smile at the loss of control. He rarely lets me see this much, which just shows that my plan of using the girl is working. She’s making him, and the others if I’m not mistaken, feel much more than they have in years. I’d noticed how they’d just shut off in recent years, not to mention the restlessness I felt from all of them. I needed a means of control, and that pretty little bitch is proving to do nicely.

“We both know that you gave up the right to that title long ago, *Odette*.” His words are meant to cut, but I stopped feeling pain around the time that his father walked out on us, leaving

me to care for a small child with no money or a way to provide for him, but I managed. I always do.

“You understand that this means we will need to host a party soon. You’ll need to get the others ready.” My pulse quickens, the idea of what I can make in one night leaving me a little breathless. Especially if my delightful stepdaughter gets involved.

His jaw works, and I raise a brow. “We won’t do it. Not now that we’re with Ember.”

“Oh really? And does she know about the number of men and women you’ve all slept with? About the parties and how you all took part with very little prompting, desperate to get your dicks wet?” His nostrils flare, his fists clenching, but it’s all the answer I need. “I didn’t think so. Plus, I would have thought that you’d prefer it to be you boys as the chief attraction.”

His eyes narrow, and I bite the inside of my cheek to stop the smile from spreading across my lips. This has worked better than I ever dared hope.

“What the fuck do you mean?” he seethes, taking a step closer as if to intimidate me. It doesn’t work though. I’ve got too much on him and his brothers to comprehend fear around them.

“Such foul language, son. I know that the women you take like you to mistreat them, but I am not among them, so I’d appreciate it if you watched your tongue.” His posture is stiff, his muscles rigid, and the heady rush of power I feel at having him, having them all at my command is enough to brighten my day.

“Apologies, Odette.” He takes an inhale, slowly pushing the breath out through his nostrils. He doesn’t mean it, I know he doesn’t, but frankly, I don’t care as long as he does as he’s told, just like always. “What do you mean by us being the chief attraction?”

“Oh, that.” I wave my hand like it’s of no consequence. “Well, people will pay handsomely for a young filly.

Especially if she's unwilling." His face drains of colour, and this time I let some of my smile show through. "I'm so glad we understand each other. It benefits all of us after all. You wouldn't want your dear little sister to give up her dreams of art college to work in McDonald's, would you? Never mind the trauma that the other experience might have on her."

He's silent, his fists clenched so tightly by his sides that his knuckles have gone white.

"I'll tell them." His words are barely audible, but I hear them all the same, and the rush I get from his acquiescence is one I've not experienced for a while.

"Good. Now run along, I have some business to attend to." I look down at the papers strewn on the desk, dismissing him.

The door closes behind him and I smile fully, knowing that I have given myself more time to work out this shitshow. Taking the paper from the desk drawer, my fingers wrinkle it as rage fills my veins.

My dear departed husband left everything, the entirety of his estate and fortune to his darling daughter. Oh sure, he left me enough to get by, but that was not what I signed up for, but then, he's a man, and they never fulfil the promises they make, I know that more than most.

I had to think quickly when I received his last Will and Testament, but as with most things in life, anything can be sorted with a little money to smooth the way. Employing my solicitor to read a Will of my making wasn't difficult, and once I've destroyed this one, I doubt anyone will ever discover the true contents.

Now, to work out how to get the money and estate. I could marry her off to Prince, but he's a stubborn bastard and that would finally give him the power to leave me, just like his father all those years ago. He told me I was too clingy, too demanding. I just wanted what was best for us, but he couldn't see it, couldn't handle my ambition.

Prince is so like his father; dark, handsome, and so damn broody. He was the only thing left of the man I gave my heart

to, the only man I ever loved. I could never let Prince go, but just like his father, he'd leave me if he could, and I can't have that.

No, I need to think of something else. Something that will ensure I get what I'm owed, and I am owed. I've found in life that you have to take what you want, by any means necessary.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“LOVE ME HARDER” BY ARIANA GRANDE

EMBER

A part of me feels terrible at not being there when Odette told the staff that we could no longer employ them, but I couldn't face it. The thought of saying goodbye to more people in my life left me nauseous, so I took the coward's way out and hid with the guys in the living room.

The next morning, I head down to breakfast with Oct; the others having gone down first to make us all something. I thought we'd just eat in the kitchen, but Odette calls to us as we pass the dining room, and as we walk in, I come to a grinding halt when I see her sitting in my father's chair at the head of the table.

“Good morning, Ember, honey,” she greets sweetly, an expectant smile on her face, which is perfectly made up as usual. I inhale deeply, trying not to let the sight of her taking his place affect me.

“Good morning, Odette,” I whisper, looking away and shaking my head, letting Oct lead us to his and Kit's usual places.

“Grub's up!” Kit calls as he strides into the room, an enormous plate of bacon in his hands. Prince and Cas follow, both carrying plates filled with all my favourite breakfast foods, and my stomach gives a loud growl that has Oct laughing.

“Looks like our girl is hungry,” he says, reaching over and piling several bits of bacon on my plate, and then some eggs and waffles before drizzling it all with maple syrup.

“I think perhaps Ember might like to take it easy—” Odette starts, but Prince cuts her off with a growl.

“She eats what she wants.” He holds Odette’s stare, a battle of wills between them she loses, looking away first.

“Fine.” Her jaw is tight, and I wonder why she let him win, why she’s not the one in charge of what I eat anymore?

“Tuck in, Little Sis,” Oct encourages, and glancing down at my plate, I can’t help taking a deep inhale of all the delicious smells. There’s also something about having them cook it for me that makes my chest tight.

“While we’re all here,” Odette announces just as Cas places a plate of rye bread and avocado in front of her. My stomach clenches, wondering what fresh hell she’s about to bring. That seems to be her MO. “I wanted to let you all know that in two weeks’ time, we will have a gathering here. These people may help us out of our current...predicament, so we need to give a good impression.” She looks at each of the guys, and I feel there is something more behind what she’s saying, as my stepbrothers’ faces are all grim determination and thin lips. “Ember, honey.” I jerk my attention back to her. “I’ll need you to make sure the house is spotless, we want to impress our guests.”

“O—okay, I can do that,” I stammer, pushing my food around my plate, suddenly not hungry anymore. “We could always see about getting jobs, we could help—” Her tittering cuts me off, and I slam my lips shut.

“Oh, honey, you really are clueless about the world, aren’t you? Not your fault, of course, your father kept you very sheltered. No job you or the boys could get would pay for this house, or the lifestyle you like, your private tutors, et cetera. So I’m looking into other ways of generating income, and I think these people may help us.”

My cheeks flush, embarrassment making my throat dry. She's right, I have been sheltered, allowed to do what I wanted and not have to worry about money as I know many people do. I am woefully unprepared for the real world.

"Of course," I agree quietly, my head bowed as I stare at the breakfast that moments ago looked mouthwatering. Yet now I'm not sure I can take a single bite.

"Here, Pretty Thing. I made these waffles especially, it's my dad's recipe," Kit urges, cutting off a corner, spearing it with his fork, and then holding it out to me. "Just try a little."

I open my mouth, and he gives me a blinding smile as he places the morsel on my tongue. The sweetness of waffle combines with the smokiness of the syrup and I quietly moan as the flavours hit my tongue.

"You shouldn't be allowed to make that kind of noise when I'm not inside you, Little Sis," Oct purrs in my ear, and heat suffuses my entire body, leaving my pulse racing and allowing me to forget my earlier embarrassment.

Kit continues to feed me, not allowing me to take my fork and feed myself, and I must confess, although I never thought that I would let someone do something like this, I quite like it. The care he shows in making sure that I'm full and need nothing else.

"Well," Odette says, standing up, and we all turn to stare at her. I must admit that I'd forgotten about her presence entirely, Kit taking up all my attention. "I have a few things to sort out to prepare for our gathering. Ember, honey, would you be a dear and clean away the breakfast things? Then make a start on the guest rooms?"

"Sure," I answer without thinking, my brows dipped low. It's not that I don't know how to clean, I used to help Mum back in our previous house. There's just something about being told to do it, because even I know Odette isn't asking regardless of how the words are phrased as such.

"Excellent, thank you." She strides out of the room, her heels *clacking* on the marble floor of the hallway as she

presumably makes her way to my father's office. His old office, I mean.

The sound echoes in my ears, and suddenly, it's like I can't breathe, the walls far too close. Everything feels so out of control, has been since Odette and the guys exploded into my life.

"Cinders, baby, breathe with me," Cas's soothing voice breaks through my panic, and my palm rises and falls, pressed against his chest. The pressure in my own loosens, and I find my lungs copying his, sweet oxygen filling them up. "That's it, good girl."

Blinking, his gorgeous face comes swimming into view, his copper eyes dark with concern.

"Thanks," I breathe out, rubbing over the centre of my chest where my heart is only just beginning to slow down.

"Always, Cinders." His hand squeezes mine, which is still held to his chest, and I love the heat that radiates from him.

The sound of a piece of cutlery clinking off a plate draws my attention over to the other side of the table, where Prince is lounging back in his chair while holding a spoon. Then he drops it, the sharp thud making me flinch when it hits the wooden floor.

"Pick it up, Sugar." His voice is all dark command, and a shiver races up my spine, my panic dissipating in the wake of pure lust.

"What the fuck, Prince?" Cas snarls, shooting up from his crouched position in front of me. His face is tight, his nostrils flared as he faces his older brother.

"A lot has happened in the past few weeks, the past few days, Cas, and our little sister needs to let go for a while. Let someone else take the reins and just do what she's told, don't you, Sugar?" His words are gentle, but still full of soft command, like he knows me better than I know myself but wants me to recognise that and let him take the lead.

My hands tremble where they rest on my thighs, a sense of breathlessness coming over me. I think of Kit feeding me and

how I didn't have to lift a finger or decide if I wanted to eat. The relief I've felt since they came into my life, taking over and taking care of me.

"Yes." The single word that falls from my lips might be quiet, but it packs one hell of a punch, all eyes turning to me, hunger in their gazes. They want to control me just as much as I want to let them.

"Then come over here and pick up the fucking spoon like a good little girl," Prince orders, the sharp tone in his voice making me tingle all over.

I get up on shaky legs, Cas moving aside as I make my way around the table and stop in front of Prince. Holding his gaze, I sink to my knees between his splayed legs, not missing the way his green eyes darken to the colour of the forest at night.

The spoon is next to his left foot, and as I reach for it, I hear the unmistakable sound of a zipper being lowered. Fire races across my skin, leaving my nerves prickling.

"For fuck's sake, Prince," Cas hisses, and I peer up to see Prince's enormous dick in front of my face, the spiced rum scent of him mixed in with an all-male musk that has my mouth watering.

"While you're down there, Sugar," he drawls, an obvious challenge in his eyes, a dark brow raised. Looking back down, I pick up the spoon, rise on my knees, and then place it on the table before turning back to Prince. He holds my gaze, and my stomach flutters as my core heats at the idea of taking him in my mouth in the middle of the dining room.

Keeping our eyes locked, I shuffle closer, lowering back down until my mouth is a hair's breadth away from his head, and as I glance down, I see that there is already pre-cum beading at his tip. I blow out a breath, watching as his thighs clench, a small smile lifting my lips at the thought that I can have such an effect on him without even a single touch.

He says nothing, doesn't make a move to encourage me to swallow him, just lets me tease him with my breath for a few

moments. Unable to resist any longer, my tongue darts out, gathering the pre-cum and letting the salty flavour coat my tongue.

“Fuuuck, Sugar,” he moans, a hand coming to the back of my head and resting lightly there.

Needing no more encouragement, I take him into my mouth, his low groan all I need to tell me he’s enjoying this slow buildup as much as I am. My thighs clench as I take more of him, going lower until he hits the back of my throat and I gag.

“You take his dick so well, Cinders,” Cas praises from the side, and I roll my eyes to look up at him, my lips wrapped around Prince. “Fucking beautiful.”

The praise does something to me, and I sink deeper, letting Prince fill my throat as I swallow around him. It’s difficult, he’s fucking huge and the stretch along my lips borders on pain, but I welcome the sharp sensation, using it to ground me in this moment and forget all about the past few days, weeks, and everything that’s happened to me recently.

I lose myself to giving Prince pleasure, using my hands to cup his balls and pump the part of him that won’t fit in my mouth, my saliva easing the way.

“Shit, your mouth is made to take me,” he rasps out, his voice pained as his grip on my hair tightens. “Let me fuck that beautiful mouth of yours.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to answer, thrusting his hips and burying himself inside my throat as tears stream down my face, and I grasp his thighs and hold on. He snarls and growls as he pumps into me, pulling out, only to force his way back down my throat, and I’m so wet my panties and possibly leggings are completely ruined.

His dick suddenly goes impossibly hard, and I glance up through my tears to see his head thrown back, a deep growl leaving his throat as he pours hot cum down mine. I swallow every drop, not having much choice as I can barely breathe around him, and soon I become lightheaded with the lack of

oxygen, but still, he doesn't pull out. I wait, needing him to take the reins completely and command my every move.

Just as my lungs scream, my jaw aching, he withdraws, slumping back in his chair, his semi-hard cock lying against his thigh, glistening with my saliva. I take a gasp of air, my body trembling with a mix of desperate need and oxygen denial.

"Come here, Little Sis," Oct says, and I peek up, my gaze a little blurry around the edges. He's at his usual seat, his hooded eyes intense, the blue almost entirely swallowed up by the black of his pupil.

I have to use my hands to help me up before Cas takes my arm and leads me back around the table to stand in front of Oct.

"You did such a good job. Look how wrecked you've made your stepbrother. I bet you're soaked," Oct purrs, and a small whimper sounds in my throat. He's right, I'm burning with need, aching to relieve the ache between my thighs. "Show me."

With trembling hands, I grip the top of my leggings, pushing them and my knickers down to my ankles, Cas helping me to remove them completely.

"Up on the table, Ember," Kit orders, and licking my lips, I glance down to see the space in front of Oct is clear. A shiver cascades over my skin, raising goosebumps as I take Oct's outstretched hand, letting him help me up and place my feet either side of his legs as he sits back down. I lean back on my hands, looking through my splayed thighs at him.

"Wider," Oct commands, and I comply, flushing when Cas and Kit lean in to stare at my most intimate of places.

"Fucking stunning, Cinders," Cas breathes before reaching out a finger and swiping it through my slick folds. A burst of pleasure flies across my nerve endings, making me arch, and I watch as he brings his fingertip to his lips, licking off the wetness and rolling his eyes. "You taste like heaven."

“Yes, she does,” Oct murmurs, and then his head is between my thighs, his tongue licking long lines from my opening to my clit. Fire races from his touch, and I close my eyes, my fingers gripping the tablecloth as I let his tongue soothe me as much as it sets me ablaze. “So fucking incredible.”

“Do share, brother,” Kit drawls, and Oct leans back, his lips glistening and his cheeks flushed as he moves my leg aside to swap seats with Kit, who gives me a cheeky grin before leaning in and blowing across my damp folds. “I will not stop until you are coming and screaming my name. Then Cas will stuff you full of his cock, and you will beg for it, just like the desperate little cum slut you are.”

My breath stutters out of me, a low moan falling from my lips as he eats me like a man on a mission. It takes an embarrassingly short time before I do exactly as he said, screaming his name as waves of euphoria drown me, pushing me to my back with the sheer ferocity of the pleasure that coats my insides.

I’m a panting, hot mess as they move my leg again, and I open bleary eyes to find Cas now standing between my thighs, his hard, pierced dick gripped in his hand. He lines it up to my still spasming entrance, and in a single smooth thrust, seats himself deep inside me.

“Jesus, Cinders. You always feel so fucking good,” he moans, his eyes closed for a moment as he lets me adjust to his intrusion. None of my stepbrothers are lacking in the big dick energy department, and they have the equipment to back it up. He opens his lids, his copper irises burning into me. “I’m going to fill you up, Princess. Then you’ll walk around with me inside you all damn day.”

I clench around him, loving the idea of having him with me wherever I go. He chuckles before slowly moving, pumping in and out of me like he has all the time in the world.

And I fucking love it.

I revel in the feelings that he’s giving my body, in the slow buildup of the pleasure that I know will destroy me. My eyes

close as I focus on the sensation of letting go and allowing myself this moment to experience it fully.

“Little Sis,” Oct’s amused voice filters my haze of desire, and I blink my lids open to see that he’s leaning over the table, his fingers stroking down the side of my face. “I’m going to fuck Cas while he’s inside you, okay?”

White-hot electricity shoots down my spine at his words, and Cas curses as my cunt clenches around him.

“Yes, fuck, Oct, yes.” The words are a prayer, a plea for him to make good on his promise because I can’t think of anything hotter than my stepbrothers fucking each other while they fuck me.

A groan steals my attention and I gasp when I see Kit standing there to the side of us, Prince on his knees in front of him, roughly swallowing Kit’s dick.

“You like what you see, Pretty Thing?” Kit asks, his hand buried in Prince’s hair and forcing him to take more.

“Yeah, she fucking likes it,” Cas grits out, thrusting hard and leaving me breathless. “She just fucking flooded my dick.”

He pauses, and Oct gives me a kiss before reaching for the pot of natural yoghurt. My eyebrows furrow. Surely he will not use that where I think he is?

“Don’t look at me like that, Little Sis,” he teases, popping the lid and taking a scoop of it in his fingers. I watch as he smears it over his dick, giving himself a pump. “It’s safe to use as lube, and I think Cas would appreciate that, don’t you?”

My cheeks heat at the question. I’ve never seen two men have sex before, and now for them to be doing that while Cas is buried inside me, it makes me wetter than I ever have been, which is saying something with these four around.

Oct disappears behind Cas, and moments later Cas is being pressed on top of me, his body pushing mine into the table.

“Fuck, Oct,” Cas groans, and his cock gets harder inside me, my eyes going wide as I watch the play of pained anguish

crossing his face.

“Does it hurt?” I ask, reaching a hand out to cup his cheek. His copper eyes lock on me, and they’re so bright they practically shine.

“A little, the *asshole* never preps properly.” He grunts and I gasp when he jerks, going deeper inside me, and I get the impression Oct pushed in further by the way Cas’s jaw clenches. “But, shit, it feels incredible too. Especially with you wrapped around me.”

He presses his forehead to mine, both of us covered in beads of sweat as his hips move, the sound of Oct’s flesh hitting Cas’s filling my ears. I grasp Cas’s shoulders, holding on as Oct takes his pleasure, and damn, it’s building me up quickly.

“Cas...” I rasp, and as if he knows what I need, one of his hands wiggles between us, his fingers finding my clit. As soon as he rubs over the engorged bud, I explode, my body filled with lightning as pleasure shoots across every nerve ending.

“Fuck, Cinders...” Cas moans, thrusting hard and burying himself deep inside me as my orgasm pulls him under.

Oct thrusts once, twice, then he’s pushing Cas deeper as he, too, finds release with a sexy fucking groan that prolongs my climax, my nails biting into Cas’s shoulders.

“Open your eyes, baby,” Cas commands in a rough voice. “Look at Kit and Prince. Watch how you undo them, how Prince lets Kit take control just because he knows it turns you on.”

My body reacts before my fevered mind has caught up, and my eyes blink open, showing me a vision that I know will be burned on my retinas for fucking years.

Kit has a tight grip on Prince’s hair and is using it to fuck his mouth with brutal force, Prince grasping Kit’s thighs and taking it, tears streaming down his cheeks, but neither of their eyes are on each other. No, both are laser-focused on me, and then Cas’s fingers move again on my clit.

“Shit! Cas, I c—can’t,” I sob, my body wriggling to get away, but he doesn’t let me, Oct pushing down on us both and trapping me.

“Just one more, baby. For Kit.” His words are a rough command, and I’m helpless to deny his request.

Kit growls. “You don’t look away from me, Ember. You hold my gaze while he makes you come again.”

Although my body trembles and my nerves are fried, the orgasm is wrenched from me as I keep my eyes on Kit’s, his intense stare demanding me to come for them again.

And I do.

I scream, my entire body going white-hot and molten as my climax tears me apart. I can’t see Kit anymore, I can’t see anything, blinded by such exquisite pleasure that I’m not sure I’ll ever come down from the high. My body writhes as my nerves are set ablaze, my orgasm unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before.

Then the weight lifts off me, Cas’s dick slips free, and I’m lifted into arms that smell like rum and leather and feel like home. Prince’s lips come down to mine, and even with my eyes closed I can feel how puffy and swollen they are.

He kisses me softly, reverently, like I am his entire world. He tastes like Kit, and I slowly lick inside his mouth, chasing the taste of my other stepbrother.

“You are so fucking perfect, Sugar,” he whispers against my lips. Goosebumps cover my skin, the slight chill of leaving the warm dining room forcing me to open my eyes fully to find that he’s headed for the stairs.

“I—I have to clean the breakfast things,” I say, my voice all kinds of hoarse. I guess that’s what having multiple orgasms will do to a girl.

“The others will take care of that while I take care of you, darlin’,” he tells me softly, his own voice husky and rasping. “We’ll help you with the guest rooms too.”

I snuggle closer in his arms, warmth filling my entire body.

I am no longer alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“OLD MONEY” BY LANA DEL RAY

KIT

The party is tomorrow, and I suspect I’m not the only one who feels sick to my stomach about what will happen. Prince told us what Odette said, that if we didn’t comply, she’d use Ember as one of the principal attractions.

I wasn’t the only one to throw something against the wall when he delivered that blow, and what’s worse is we can’t do a fucking thing about it, because we have nothing. No jobs. No money. Fucking nothing. It’s taken Ember coming into our lives to hit that point home.

It’s a fucking shitshow, and I don’t know how to get us out of it.

“Hey,” Prince greets, slipping into the wicker chair next to mine on the patio, the tinkling of water from the fountain in front of us filling the air. It’s warmer today, the spring sun shining down, and although it’s nowhere near the temperature it gets to in Cali, it’s pleasant. So we sat outside for a bit, looking out over the vast garden. It’s looking a little wild, and I wonder how long it will be before Odette suggests Ember takes care of it as well as the house.

My fists clench in my lap.

“Kit.” Prince sighs, reaching over and grasping my shoulder. “I’ll find a way, Kit. I just need more time—” His voice sounds as frustrated as I feel.

“How?!” I shout, the birds startling in the trees and taking flight. I leap out of the chair, spinning to face him, my vision tinged red with pent-up anger at our situation. “How the fuck are you going to get us out of this, Prince? She has us by the fucking balls and there’s shit we can do about it, just like always.”

He flinches, and guilt makes my throat go tight at my insinuation. That somehow he’s to blame for his mother’s behaviour. I know he used to be taken with the idea of free pussy, even if it was older than we would have chosen ourselves, but free and we make some money from it? We all signed up without worrying too much about the stain on our souls.

Plus, Odette always made it seem like not a big deal, and that we owed her for taking us in after the death of our fathers. My chest tightens as it always does when I think about Dad, about how different our lives would have been if he hadn’t got in that car to pick us up.

“I don’t fucking know, okay? But I will figure something out,” Prince implores, his hands coming up to brush through his hair. He’s usually so in charge, the unofficial leader of us, that it takes me aback to see him so unsure.

“Figure out what?” a soft voice asks, and my eyes widen, my stomach dropping like I’ve just taken a leap off a cliff and I’m unsure if the water below is deep enough to cushion my fall.

Ember steps from behind me, and she looks pale as she glances between both of us.

“Who has you by the balls, Kit? Is it Odette? What do you need to get out of?” Her questions land like bullets, telling me she heard everything, and my jaw works but no sound comes out. Prince just sits there, shoulders rounded, looking defeated.

“What’s going on?” Oct asks, his smile dropping as he saunters towards us. “Little Sis, are you okay?”

He rushes to her when she doesn’t answer right away, wrapping his arms around her, but unlike usual, she doesn’t

sink into his embrace, and his brows dip low.

“Prince and Kit were talking about someone having them by the balls, about trying to get out of something, and they won’t tell me what it is,” she says, and I can see the slight tremble in her hands, the hurt in her beautiful blue eyes cleaving my soul in two.

Oct turns his wide gaze to us, his tanned skin ashen as he realises what she must have overheard. She looks to him, seeing that he’s clearly in on it, and steps out of his embrace.

“Sugar—” Prince starts, but at that moment, Odette is suddenly sweeping onto the patio, Cas following behind her.

“Ah, Ember, honey, there you are,” she says, and then pauses, looking at each of us. I’m sure I’m not the only one of my brothers who sees a glint of mischief in her eyes. “Why are you all looking so glum?”

“What have you done to them, Odette?” Ember asks, her tone sharp and her blue eyes flashing. She may not understand what we were talking about, but she has a good idea of who the root cause of it is. Clever, beautiful stepsister.

“Nothing they didn’t agree to long ago,” Odette blithely states, waving her hand. “Young men always enjoy sowing their wild oats, the pleasures of the flesh are hard to resist, apparently. I just gave them a way to make that benefit us.”

I’m watching Ember, seeing the exact moment that comprehension dawns, and my heart beats so fucking fast inside my chest that it leaves me dizzy. I lock my knees, refusing to buckle or even sway while Odette, our tormentor, is here.

“The party...” Her mouth falls open, her fingers touching her parted lips. Then she lowers her hand, taking a step closer to Odette. Her lip curls, her pale face scrunching like she’s just tasted something revolting. “You force them to have sex with women for money?”

Odette titters, and the sound grates against my ears, adding to the way my stomach churns. “Oh, honey. They didn’t need any forcing. They were happy to take part. Well, until you

came along, but they understand what will happen if they don't comply this time."

Ember's entire body freezes, and I wish she didn't have to hear this. Didn't have to learn about the horrors of our world.

"What will happen if they don't do it?" Her voice is like the rustle of dry leaves, and I step towards her, the need to be close to her overwhelming. Odette takes a step closer, staring right into Ember's eyes, a vicious smile on her lips.

"People will pay a lot of money for an unwilling pussy." Ember's knees give out, and I'm close enough to catch her before she hits the ground, holding her to me and trying to give her my strength to face this ugly truth.

"Y—you're a m—monster," she whispers, letting me pull her close as her eyes fill with tears and her whole body shakes.

"Perhaps, but unlike you, sheltered little princess that you are, I know what it's like to go without, and I swore to myself a long time ago that I would never be in that position again. So wake up, stepdaughter. You were always a prize to be won. So keep them in line and you will remain their prize, no one else's."

Then she turns on her designer heels, striding through the French doors that lead back into the house without a backward glance.

Silence descends on us, and a quick glance around at my brothers knows they are just as lost as I am about what to say next. Ember finally knows about everything, and although there's the relief that the person you love knows your deepest, darkest secret, there's also mind-numbing terror.

What if she hates us? What if she decides that we're not worth it, that we're too damaged to love?

EMBER

It's like a gale-force wind rushes past my ears, and although I can feel myself in Kit's arms, it's also like everything is softened and we're all underwater.

"C—can you help me sit down?" I ask him, and he blinks, nodding and helping guide me to the wicker chair that he was sitting in moments ago before my world came tumbling down and I got a glimpse into the nastiness of our world.

"Sugar—" I cut Prince off with a raised palm.

"How many parties have you done?" I ask, regretting the question as soon as it leaves my lips. Will that make a difference? To know how many times they sold themselves? My gaze flits from one to another of them, searching their pale, drawn faces, though I'm not sure what I'm looking for.

"Since I was thirteen," Prince states, his voice devoid of all emotion. Tears sting my eyes and my stomach is in knots at his confession. "Several times a year, maybe four or five, so that makes..." He pauses, clearly doing the maths. "So like forty, perhaps more."

Bile fills my throat, and I peer at the others. "And you?" I ask Cas.

"I was thirteen too, so started the year after Prince, you know, because he's a year older than me," he tells me, his ears red as his shoulders curve in. I want to reach out and hold him, but I hold back, needing to understand all the facts first. Glancing at Oct and Kit next, not sure why I need to discover how long she abused them for, I wait for their answer, and I have no doubt in my mind it was abuse, even if she wasn't the one to actually do it herself.

"Thirteen for us too, and it felt like a rite of passage at first," Oct tells me, coming closer and hunching down in front of me, taking my icy hands in his warm ones. "But the excitement soon wore off, and I could never get clean, no matter how many showers I took afterwards. I didn't feel clean until you, Little Sis."

A sob tears free from my chest, and I throw myself forward, out of my chair and into Oct's arms. He catches me, banding his arms tightly around me and pulling me into him.

"I-I'm so sorry she did that t-to you," I cry out, burying my face against his neck and trying to breathe him in.

"Hey, hey, Pretty Thing," Kit says from next to me, and I release Oct to twist and pull Kit in for a tight hug. "You're not mad at us?"

Pulling back slightly, I gaze into his handsome face and see the lines of worry around his eyes, the way he won't hold me too tightly as if I'm going to walk away.

"No, you were fucking children, Kit," I tell him, looking into his stony eyes and smoothing a hand down his cheek. "How could I be mad at you for her abuse?"

"Fuck, Ember," he rasps, tears making his eyes swim, and then he's crashing his lips against mine in a desperate kiss. I taste our tears, our sadness at a world that lets this kind of thing happen.

Reluctantly, I pull away, knowing that Cas and Prince will need to feel my acceptance too. As if he knows my intentions, which is often the case, Cas is there, pulling me tightly into him. His heart races against my chest, his grip around me almost too tight, but I don't ask him to ease up, knowing he needs this just as much as I do.

"You are so much more than we deserve, Cinders," he tells me, and I'm shaking my head before he's even said the last word. Keeping my arms around him, I pull away enough that I can gaze into his beautiful copper eyes, and then I take a leap.

"I love you, Cas." The words feel so right leaving my lips, like they were always there, just waiting for me to utter them into the world, but only for them.

His eyes widen, his jaw going slack as his body freezes. Moments pass that feel like a lifetime, then his copper eyes turn molten.

"Say it again," he demands in a revenant whisper, and the intensity in his gaze has me wanting to shrink back, but I hold

firm.

“I love you, Cas. I love the way you take care of me, the way you make sure I’m okay, and the way you know what I need before even I do. I. Love. You.”

“Fuck, Cinders.” His eyes fill with tears, his voice choked. “I love you too.”

A small sob leaves my lips, but unlike before, it’s filled with happiness, and as his lips come down on mine, it’s the salt of love that coats our tongues. All too soon the kiss ends, and while I understand telling him first was the right move, I need to take the same leap with the others too.

Slowly spinning in Cas’s arms, I see Oct and Kit standing, so I step away from Cas and into Kit.

“I love you, Kit,” I tell him, and for a moment his eyes close, his head dropping back, and a smile so beautiful tugs his lips up, outshining the spring sun. He licks his lips and then stares back at me, his eyes a swirling storm of emotion. “I love the way you make me feel so safe, and like I’m the most precious thing in the world.”

“I love you, Ember,” he tells me simply, and my cheeks ache with the smile that lifts them. He lowers his lips, kissing me with all the wildness that he usually only shows in his eyes, and I take it all.

Then I’m spinning, and Oct hovers his lips above my own.

“Tell me, Little Sis,” he orders, the brush of his lips sending tingles racing across my skin.

“I love you, Oct. You are my personal sunshine, brightening the dullest day until all I can know is happiness.” My voice is a breathless whisper as I lose myself in his eyes.

His breath fans across my lips as he exhales a sigh. “I love you so fucking much, Little Sis.” He kisses my lips like he’ll never get enough of their taste, and I’m the same, dragging him closer with my hands tangled in his thick hair. He’s my sunshine, my breath of fresh air, and I don’t care what he’s done in the past, because he’s mine now.

He slowly ends the kiss, pressing his forehead to mine, and then steps back. My heart twists painfully when I see Prince, still sitting in his chair, looking as if he doesn't deserve my love, his face a mask of anguish.

He watches me as I go to him, taking a sharp inhale when I climb into his lap, my knees either side of his thick thighs, my short skirt floating around us. The soft fabric of his jeans tickles my bare inner thighs, and I grasp his face in my palms, tilting his head until those gorgeous, sparkling malachite eyes are laser-focused on me.

“I love you, Prince you-will-never-tell-me-your-real-name Marshall Brown.” His lips quirk ever so slightly at my teasing, and his hands cup my arse, pulling me closer to him. “We would all be lost without you, and I love the way you take care of us without ever being asked. That you put us all above your own happiness. None of this is your fault. None of it.”

He freezes, his eyes wide, and I know I made the right judgement call. He's their leader, the oldest, and the others follow his lead so it stands to reason that he will feel the burden of all that's happened to them most of all.

His jaw works, and then his eyes close as he lets out a long exhale.

“But she's my mom, Sugar.” The words sound painful, like a shame that has become a living, breathing thing, a stain on his heart that is poisoning him from the inside.

Nausea fills my throat, and it takes an effort to swallow it down. I assumed she was his stepmother too. His hands loosen, like he's about to let me go, and his head lowers, like he's too ashamed to even look at me.

“Look at me, Prince,” I say, my voice thick as I try to keep the tears at bay. He does as I ask, and the pain and torment in his emerald depths cuts me like a knife. “It. Is. Not. Your. Fault.”

Tears make his irises gleam like emeralds, and I lean in to kiss each of his cheeks as they fall, tasting his sadness, his desolation.

“Fuck, Sugar. I love you, even if I don’t deserve you,” he whispers, his voice a pained rasp.

“You deserve everything, Prince,” I tell him, my lips pressed up against his. “And I will give it all to you, my love.”

He doesn’t move for a second, then his fingers grip my arse so hard that I know I’ll have bruises, and he drags me into him, smashing his lips against mine in a kiss that shatters the world.

He begs for forgiveness, and I willingly give it to him, taking all of his hurt and pain and giving him all of my love in return. The salt of our tears combines, and we lose ourselves in each other for a little while, forgetting all the shit that is coming our way.

“Sugar...”

“I know, Prince,” I answer, unable to put into words all the emotions that are swirling inside me right now. Heaving a breath, I release his face, sitting back so that I can look at him properly. “We need to run.” His eyes widen, and he’s shaking his head, but I place my finger against his lips. “I know you don’t have any money, but I have some in savings that my mother left me. It’s not much, but it’ll be enough to get us away from here at least.”

“She’ll always come after us, Cinders,” Cas says, sitting down heavily next to us in the chair that Kit was using. “She won’t just let us get away. We’re her cash cows.”

“Then we give ourselves enough time to find some way to stop her, maybe get evidence of what she’s been doing all these years.” Prince stiffens underneath me, but when I look at him with a raised brow, he just shakes his head. “You said it yourself, we just need time, and I can get us that.”

“How will we get out of here, Sugar?” he asks, a small light coming back into his eyes, a hope that makes my chest tight.

I frown, not understanding what he is getting at. “We’ll just leave when she next goes out. No one will be here to stop us.”

“Not strictly speaking,” Oct says, and I twist in Prince’s lap to peek back at him.

“What do you mean?” I question, my forehead creased as my stomach quivers.

“She’s hired security, fucking dogs to patrol the grounds, the works,” he tells us, and my eyes bug out. “They arrive tomorrow morning, though fuck knows how she paid for it.”

Licking my lips, my mind races. “Then we leave tonight once she’s gone to bed. It’s not unusual for us to be up later than her, watching a film in the living room.”

“Okay.” Prince’s voice has me spinning back around to face him, and there’s the devilish smile on his plush lips that I love to see. “Pack a single bag, only the things we absolutely can’t do without, and we’ll go tonight.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“LONELY” BY NATHAN WAGNER

ODETTE

Clever little stepdaughter. I quietly move away from the French doors, heading towards the office, my eyes narrowed as I contemplate my next move. There’s a tightness in my chest, a churning of my stomach as I make my way along the hallway.

I’ve been at this game too long to be thwarted by a mere child, and I’ve too much to lose to let my boys go that easily. I vowed I would never be in a position of poverty again, and a promise to oneself is the most sacred. After all, all you can truly rely on is yourself.

Sitting down at the large, oak desk, I pull out my phone, find the contact I need, and hit call. My Louboutin-covered foot taps the wood floor impatiently as I wait for the call to connect.

“Good morning, Sentinel Security,” a chirpy voice greets on the other end of the line. A smile plasters on my face even though I’m the only one in the room. The mask never slips far.

“Ah, hello. It’s Mrs. Everly here. I’ve booked for some security to arrive tomorrow morning, but I’m going to need them to get here as soon as possible, please.”

“Of course, Mrs Everly. That won’t be a problem at all. Dan and his team will be with you within the next half hour.” The weight on my chest eases at her assurances.

“Thank you so much, and can you remind them to come in the side entrance, please?” I can’t have that little bitch or the boys catching wind of my plans.

“Of course, Mrs Everly.”

“Many thanks. You have a good day now.”

Checkmate stepdaughter, honey.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“EMPTY CROWN” BY YAS

EMBER

The guys help me clean the remaining guest rooms as we try to keep everything looking as normal as possible, but they have to leave when Odette calls them for their afternoon training session. Apparently, they can't miss that, which now makes more sense if she wants to keep them in top condition for...

My stomach churns at the idea of why she needs them looking so gorgeous and buff. How can she do this to them? Why would she do this? Not only is it fucking abhorrent, but she's also Prince's mother and should be a mother figure to the rest of them. So what is she trying to achieve? I know money is tight at the moment, but surely she's never been that hard up that she had to resort to pimping out her son and stepsons or starve? Even if she was, the end doesn't justify the means, nothing could make what she's done okay.

“Ember, honey.” I jump, my hands jerking and spilling water from the bucket that I was carrying out of the last guest bathroom as my forehead is beaded with sweat. Who knew cleaning was such hard work?

“Y–yes, Odette?” My voice might tremble, but there's a note of coldness in it I've never had cause to use with her before. I just can't keep it in, not now that I know what she really is; a fucking monster.

“I need you to help me sort through the attic, see if there’s anything up there that is worth selling or bringing down for the party.” The fake warmth she used to use with me is gone, replaced by a command that she has no right to make.

Act normal, you won’t be here soon.

“Sure,” I hesitantly reply, heading towards the stairs to leave my bucket in the kitchen.

“Oh, you can leave that here for now, I’ll get one of the boys to take it down.” She gestures to the top of the stairs, so I place the bucket on the floor and then follow behind her down the corridor. My back is tight from spending hours cleaning, and I roll my neck to ease the tension from the muscles.

She pauses at a large painting, and I stop a couple of feet away, then she reaches out to the frame. Then a soft click sounds, and the painting swings forward to reveal a dark passage beyond.

“Whoa. I never knew that was there,” I murmur, my surprise making me forget the present company for a moment. She steps back, holding her hand out to indicate that I go first. The hair on my arms rises, but I ignore the feeling of unease—I just need to get through this next crazy request and then we can leave once Odette is asleep—and step through.

“Yes, well, your father told me all about this secret staircase up to the attic. Apparently, lots of old houses here have them,” she tells me, almost conversationally. A pang hits my chest, yet another thing my father trusted this fucking snake with and not me. Sighing, pushing the pain aside, I peer into the gloom. There’s a small noise behind me, and I twist to see Odette grabbing a battery-powered torch, handing it to me before she, too, steps through and shuts the painting behind us. The darkness of the space immediately closes around me, the chill, musty air making me shiver.

“Huh, I guess that’s not surprising, and to be honest, I did not know we even had an attic,” I muse, turning the torch on and sweeping it across the space. A thick layer of dust coats the old wooden stairs that are now visible in the gloom.

“Quite. Up you go then,” she orders, and taking in an inhale of stale air, I straighten my shoulders and place my foot on the first stair. It creaks and groans under my weight, but feeling Odette so close behind me, I carry on, and soon, sweat beads along my spine.

“Gosh, it’s high up,” I wheeze, and she just titters behind me.

“Well, if you were in better shape, honey, it wouldn’t be such a trial now, would it?” Her tone is sickly sweet, the same one people use when they are insulting you but pretending like they’re not being a cunt.

I grit my teeth, my nostrils flaring as anger fuels my last few steps. I pause at the small landing, taking some deep breaths in order to calm my racing heart. Fuck me, that was a lot of stairs.

Before me stands a thick wooden door, which looks really fucking sturdy given that this is the attic, a place to store unwanted things that you can’t be bothered to get rid of. Reaching out, I grasp the doorknob and twist, almost surprised when it opens easily.

I blink at the light-filled space, seeing that there are several dormer windows letting in pools of light. Perhaps it isn’t so bad up here after all. My eyes scan across the room, finding a few ghostly shapes, presumably furniture under white sheets, and a few boxes, trunks, old mirrors, and paintings leaning against the walls. I wonder if the previous owners left some of this stuff here as I don’t recognise a lot of it.

My eyes catch on something, and I have to blink several times to make sense of what I’m seeing. Taking a few steps closer, it fully comes into view and my brows dip low.

What is a bed doing up here? It’s not the beautiful, cream metal frame that has me confused, but the fact that it’s made up with what looks like freshly laundered sheets.

“Odette...?” I turn, seeing her still on the other side of the doorway, a large key in her hand and a hulking shadow behind her. My heart thuds painfully inside my chest as my mind

screams at me to run, but there's nowhere to go. I take a step towards her, and she just smiles her stunning, fake smile at me.

"It's sweet that you think you could take them away from me. Especially when I was the one to give you to them in the first place," she tells me, that smile now looking evil as the light from the room casts eerie shadows across her features. "You were always a means to control them, Ember, not a way to set them free."

And before I can do anything else, the door slams with a thud that echoes around the room, followed by the *click* of the lock.

I run to it anyway, trying the knob and pounding my fists on the solid wood.

"Fucking let me out, you bitch! You can't keep me here!" Adrenaline rushes through me, but it doesn't give me enough strength to break the door down, it's just too bloody heavy. My heart thuds dully in my chest, tears pricking behind my eyelids as my hands suddenly go limp at my sides. I'm stuck here, with no way out and no one coming to rescue me.

I strain to listen, but no one answers, and I can hear her heels clicking down the stairs, the sound getting quieter, sealing my incarceration.

"She's not coming back, girlie," a deep voice sounds on the other side of the door, my raised fists pausing. "So I wouldn't waste your breath."

"W—who are you?" I ask, my hands trembling as I press my forehead to the door and tears fill my eyes. There's a flicker of hope, knowing at least I'm not totally alone, even if it is someone who is in the pay from my evil stepmother.

"Name's Dan," he replies in that same deep tone, and then I remember the shadow behind Odette.

"Dan, I need you to help get me out of here. She's holding me against my will and she's going to make the boys do something horrible." I can't bring myself to say the words. Can't bear to tell a stranger that she's going to force them to

have sex with strange women, and they'll do it all because they love me and won't let me take their place.

"I'm not paid to interfere, miss..." he starts, but he sounds unsure and I jump on it. I press myself closer to the wood, my limbs tingling as my stomach flutters.

"Well, maybe you could get a message to one of the boys? So they at least know where I am?" I ask, hope filling my chest. I'm sure they'd be able to help, to get me out somehow.

"I'm not sure..."

"Please, Dan. She's..." I swallow hard, deciding that knowing the truth might help my cause, our cause. "She's going to force them to sleep with women for money, and if they refuse, s-she's going to s-sell me to the highest bidder for the night."

Tears track down my cheeks as I wait for his reply, the small nugget of hope at having found an ally dwindling like a flame flickering in the wind the longer he remains silent. I wait so long that I don't think he'll answer, and it's as if all that was holding me up is gone as I sink to my knees on the dusty floor.

"I'll see what I can do. No promises."

"WITHOUT YOU" BY URSINE VULPINE

OCT

"Anyone seen Ember?" I ask, striding into Prince's room where I find the others, all of us damp from our showers after a rigorous training session with Andy. "She's not in her room."

Prince sits at his desk, his back straightening and his brows furrowed at my question. "She was cleaning the guest quarters, I think. Getting it ready for tomorrow."

I look at my twin, seeing the worry shining in his eyes, his feet bouncing as he sits on the edge of the bed. Cas gets up, heading to the door I just came out of, but it opens before he reaches it, and my heartbeat becomes rapid as Odette walks in with two armed men.

“Ah, I’m glad that you’re all in one place, makes this so much easier,” she says, her pleasant tone sending shivers down my spine.

“What the fuck have you done to Ember, Odette?” Prince growls out, his voice low and menacing as he gets to his feet.

She waves her perfectly manicured hand in the air as if Ember’s whereabouts is not important. “She’s safe, for now. Although I must admit, her plan was brilliant, if a little simple.”

My muscles tense, and I cast a glance at Kit as he comes to stand next to me with his jaw set and nostrils flared. Prince steps away from his chair, striding over to Odette, but one of the armed men raises his gun and points it right between Prince’s eyes. We all freeze, my breath catching.

“Now, we don’t need to have any of that, do we? It would be such a shame if anything were to happen to your dear stepsister on account of your poor decisions.” She’s cool as a motherfucking cucumber, and rage makes my vision waver as she threatens my soulmate. *Our* soulmate. “Here’s what’s going to happen,” she continues, the fucking gun still pointing at Prince. “No one is running away, and you *will* take part in the party tomorrow night as planned. If you try to do anything, try to find her and escape, you will fail. These men and their team have orders to keep you all secure by any means necessary, but more than that, I have someone who is very interested in the lovely Ember, says she’ll sell for millions at auction, and believe me, once they have sold her you will never see her again.”

Nausea swirls in my stomach, and a noise behind us has me turning to see another guard out on the balcony, his at ease gun in his hands, his eyes trained on us.

“You fucking cunt,” Cas grits out, his entire body trembling as he holds himself back from lunging at our stepmother.

She laughs, fucking laughs, like he just told the funniest joke, and I think it’s that moment when I realize how truly insane she is. I wonder how I never saw it before, it was clearly always there, waiting. Maybe we all chose to live in ignorance, because before Ember, there wasn’t much to truly live for.

“Perhaps, but I gave her to you, so I can take her away until you’re good boys again.” I fucking hate her, more than I ever have before. My whole being bristles with it, with the loathing that sets my teeth grinding. How can we trust a word out of her lying, serpent mouth? She holds all the cards here, so it doesn’t matter if I believe her. I’ll do as she says because at least then there’s a chance that Ember will be safe. “Once you’ve cooled off, I’ll send someone to escort you down to the kitchen to make some dinner for you all and Ember. You wouldn’t want her to go hungry now, would you?”

“I’ll go,” Prince volunteers in a dark tone, and she doesn’t even bat an eye at the promise of retribution in his voice. We may have nothing now, no money, no connections, and no way out, but somehow, somehow, I know that we will get our revenge for this, for everything.

“Excellent. The rest of you can rest here and you’ll be escorted to your rooms later.” She spins on her ridiculous heels and leaves without so much as a look back, the guard who had his weapon trained on Prince lowering his gun and then waiting until Odette has left with the other guard.

“She’s in the attic,” he says, just above a whisper, his eyes fixed on Prince who gives him a nod of thanks. Then he, too, leaves, the door being shut behind him, the sound of a lock engaging loud in the silent room.

“Fuck!” Cas roars, grabbing the lamp off the bedside table and ripping it from the wall before throwing it across the room. The sound of shattering glass accompanies his harsh

breathing and tears sting my eyes at the hopelessness of the situation we're in.

Prince strides over to him, gripping the back of Cas's neck hard and pressing their foreheads together. "We'll fix this, Cas. I fucking swear it."

"How?" Cas asks, his broken voice painful to hear. "How the fuck will we do that, Prince? She has armed guards watching us, and no doubt Ember, who is all alone and trapped in the fucking attic."

Cas's chest heaves and then Prince is bringing him in close as Cas sobs into his chest. Kit and I join them, wrapping our arms around the pair as tears fill my eyes.

Cas is right, there's no way to fix this and no way to stop tomorrow night from happening. We're outmanned and outgunned, and we can't risk Odette selling Ember to fucking sex traffickers.

"We'll keep her safe, Cas," Prince assures him, his voice thick. "Even if that means we have to go through tomorrow night, at least she'll be safe."

A hot tear burns a path down my cheek and my chest is so tight that I can barely take a breath. *We'll keep her safe, but how will she ever forgive us?*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“ASTRONOMICAL” BY SVRCINA

EMBER

The hours drift by, and my stomach rumbles, my mouth cotton dry, a headache pulsing across my brows. If the lack of food and water doesn't kill me first, I may just die of boredom.

I've tried to keep busy, going through the stuff in here to try to distract my mind, if nothing else. Aside from the furniture, the boxes contained knick-knacks and trinkets, including a rather beautiful glass shoe.

The irony was not lost on me; the fact that I'm stuck in an attic by my evil stepmother just like Cinderella. She didn't have four princes though, although strictly speaking, I only have one, and she didn't have to deal with sexual exploitation and the possibility of future rape, but I guess that's all semantics at this point.

The door opening interrupts my musing, sending my pulse skyrocketing. There's a shadow standing behind Odette again as she brings a tray in, and I can't stop myself from cowering back as she gets closer. There's a silver cover on it, like it's some fancy meal being served at a high-class restaurant. The bare bulb light glints off it, leaving a stain on my irises as I blink. I was so fucking relieved to find a light switch when it got dark that I shed a few tears.

“I wouldn’t get any smart ideas, honey,” she tells me, striding across the room and setting the tray on a table that I’d found. I even used the white sheet as a tablecloth and placed a small vase of fake flowers on it for the centre. Yeah, I’ve been pretty bored. “I love what you’ve done with the place.”

“Fuck you, Odette,” I seethe through clenched teeth. The only thing stopping me from rushing the cunt is the dark looming presence at her back. She’s the one paying him, even if he sounded unsure about her actions earlier. I can’t guarantee that he’d help me take her out. I can’t see him, but I’m assuming it’s Dan, as I have heard no one else come and take his place.

“Such foul language, stepdaughter. I should wash your mouth out,” she chides, her face showing only a mild amusement, though I guess I can’t expect too much in the way of facial movement considering she probably doesn’t have any space left after all the filler and botox.

“I’d like to see you try, you fucking bitch.” My lip curls as I have to force myself not to launch at her and rip her fucking hair out.

She tuts, shaking her head as she backs towards the door. At least she’s not completely stupid.

“Enjoy your dinner, Ember, honey. The boys miss you.”

Then like a puppet whose strings have all been cut, the anger drains from me as hopelessness washes over me, and I drop to the floor, tears making the edges of the room waver.

“Why?” I ask her, my voice a broken whisper, tears stinging my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall in front of her.

She stops, looking at me with a hard ruthlessness that I’ve not seen on her beautiful face before.

“Because some of us weren’t handed everything on a silver spoon. Some of us have to work to survive and continue to do so no matter the cost.” Her words leave me cold, a shiver pebbling goosebumps all over my skin.

“But the end doesn’t justify the means, Odette. What you’re doing is wrong. What you’ve done is wrong. Why can’t

you see that?” I look into her hazel eyes and see...nothing. There’s no anger, no emotion, and it’s that emptiness which tells me more than anything else that I’m fucked. Only the worst monsters feel nothing.

“We all do what we need to, honey. Now, enjoy your food. Prince made it for you especially.”

Then she’s gone, the door locking behind her once more.

My stomach growls as the scent of my dinner wafts towards me, and I slowly get up off the floor and head towards the table. Lifting the lid, a sob falls from my chest when I see that he’s made me chicken noodles, my favourite. I’m reminded of that night when we came back from the gallery, how Oct told me they knew so much about me.

The tears start in earnest as I realise that while I told them I loved them, I know nothing about what they want for their futures, and what their hopes and dreams are. Now I’m stuck in this attic, and it feels like I’ll never be able to ask them.

Taking hold of the cloth napkin that my cutlery rests on, I use it to wipe my eyes, and a small piece of paper floats to the ground. My heart pounds inside my chest as I bend down and reach for it, unfolding the square with trembling fingers.

Sugar,

I’m so fucking sorry you’re having to go through this because of her, and I swear to you we will get you out.

For now, make sure you eat all your dinner like our good girl and Cas reminds you to drink your water.

I love you, sweet Ember. You’re one of the strongest people I know. This will not defeat you.

Prince Xxx

If I thought I was crying before, it's nothing compared to the sobs that rack my chest now, my knees giving way as I sink into the chair. My head comes to rest on my folded arms and I give in to despair and sadness, just for a minute.

The note crinkles in my fist, the sound helping to draw me out of my admittedly justified pity party. I look up at the noodles, wiping my eyes and nose on the napkin, and then I pick up my fork and eat.

Prince is right. I've survived worse than this. I thought I'd break when my mum died, but I didn't, and then again when my dad died. Yet I'm still here.

I will not let that bitch win.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“THE OTHER SIDE” BY RUELLE

PRINCE

Two days.

Two fucking days that my bitch of a mother has kept Ember locked in the attic. Tightness in my chest fills me as I try to discover an answer and come up empty. Even if we knew how to get up there, which Odette’s made sure that we fucking don’t, the armed security that patrols that grounds and the house prevents us from staging the rescue that we so desperately want to.

We’d all risk ourselves, but we won’t risk her.

Nausea swirls in my stomach as the sun sets on the second day, and the sound of cars pulling up the drive is like nails on a chalkboard.

“The guests are arriving,” Oct says, his voice flat. He steps back from the window, letting the curtain fall closed. We’re in Cas’s room, which has a view of the driveway on one side, and the line of car headlights has me trapped, my heart thudding inside my chest as I continue to think of a way to avoid this.

It’s like there’s a weight on my chest, a lump in my throat that prevents me from taking a full breath. I fucking hate that we can’t get out of this. That we’ll have to fuck these other women tonight in order to keep the one woman we all love safe.

Heaving a sigh, I reach into my pocket and pull out the packet of little blue pills that are going to be the only way I'll get it up tonight. I ordered this the moment Odette told me that we'd be taking part in this party, knowing that I couldn't maintain even a semi without them.

"Aren't we a bit young to need Viagra?" Kit asks, trying and failing to make it into a joke, but nothing about this is fucking funny.

"Will you be able to get a hard-on without it?" I question, my voice low and rough. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard. Then he shakes his head, reaching out and taking the packet after I've extracted a pill for myself.

It sits on my palm, taunting me, reminding me of how I've failed my brothers and my soulmate.

"We'll get through this," Cas says softly, placing a hand on my shoulder and giving it a squeeze. My throat damn near closes up at his words, the knowledge that we have no choice threatening to be my undoing.

"How will she forgive us?" I breathe out, knowing that none of them can give me an answer.

"She'll understand," Oct replies tightly, his jaw clenched. Then I watch as he places the pill on his tongue, reaching for the glass of water by Cas's bedside and swallowing a gulp.

He hands the glass to Kit, who takes a deep, shuddering inhale before copying him. Kit then passes it to Cas, who gives me a small nod, places the pill on his tongue, and then takes a drink, handing me the now three-quarters-empty glass.

I look down at the small pill. How can it hold so much pain? So much devastation?

"Forgive me, Sugar," I whisper, closing my eyes as I place the pill on my tongue, then use the water to wash it down.

“WHEN THE PARTY’S OVER” BY BILLIE EILISH

EMBER

Earlier, I’d gotten one window to open, and it’s the reason I hear cars pull up to the drive once it’s dark, the sound of tires crunching gravel like someone dragging Odette’s body across them. Or maybe that’s just wishful thinking on my part.

It’s only when I hear faint voices from outside that I remember what this means; the party. Tonight is the gathering where the guys will...

My hand flies to my mouth to stop the bile that burns the back of my throat from spilling out. I’ve only been getting one meal a day, so I can’t afford to throw it all up. There’s a bucket in the far corner that’s been emptied each day, but I’ve not been permitted fresh clothes or a shower. She’s taken any kind of niceties away until all I’m left with is nothing. Tears fill my eyes and the room suddenly feels too hot, too small as the walls close in on me.

I’m grateful that I’m sitting on my bed, my knees drawn to my chest, because I would have fallen flat on my arse if I’d been standing.

The idea of anyone touching them makes my blood boil, but it’s the fact that I know they will force themselves to be touched to keep me safe. They will allow these rich men and women to rape them to stop it from happening to me.

I take a deep breath, counting from ten backwards as my old therapist used to instruct me, and once I get to one, the room is less oppressive, the situation more manageable. My body is racked with chills, my fingers icy, but I’m no longer about to pass out, so small mercies and all that.

The moon is high in the night sky before I hear the tread of footsteps. Multiple sets of them.

My stomach roils and my pulse thuds in my ears as the noise of muffled voices sound beyond the door. Then I watch

in horrified fascination as it slowly opens, and in walks my stepmother followed by four strange men.

All the men are smartly dressed in what looks like expensive tailored suits, and they are a range of ages, all four older than me by some years if their weathered faces and greying hair are any indication. My arms tighten around my knees as I take in the leering way they look at me. They look at me like they're already possessing me, already taking what they want from me.

"Ember, honey, these gentlemen request the pleasure of your company this evening," Odette says, a simpering tone in her voice.

"W-what? B-but you p-promised..." I say in a whisper, the sound of my heartbeat thrashing filling my ears. One man, an older gentleman with greying hair and a potbelly, flares his nostrils, his eyes almost rolling as he scents my fear. At least, I assume that's what he's doing.

"Oh, that." Odette gives a tinkling laugh as she waves her hand in the air. "But my boys trained you to take four cocks so well, it would be a shame not to make use of your new skills, and these gentlemen have paid handsomely for you tonight."

The men laugh, then step further into the room, Odette moving to one side and backing towards the door.

"Odette! Please don't do this," I beg, my gaze flitting between her retreating form and the monsters advancing towards me. I'm frozen on the bed, unable to move as I plead with her. "You fucking promised!"

"I lied." There's no emotion in her voice, just a frozen emptiness that seals my fate. The smile drops from her face as she says the words, her face void of any kind of expression.

Then the door slams, the sound of the lock clicking loud and like a death knell. I scabble off the bed, putting it between me and the men, who seem not to be in any rush.

"S-stay away from me, you fucking perverts!" I shout, trying to keep my eyes on them while looking around to see if there's anything here that can be used as a weapon.

“*Tut-tut*, little one,” one of them chides. He looks to be the youngest of the group, maybe in his forties, but his blue eyes are shining with excitement, and a quick glance down shows me a small outline pressed against the crotch of his trousers. Bile fills my throat and I have to swallow hard not to throw up. “Such a filthy mouth. We’ll have to fill it for her, won’t we?”

“We will indeed,” Mr potbelly says, his piggy eyes trailing up and down my body. He clearly likes the look of what he sees, his slug-like tongue coming out to lick his pudgy lips.

“I doubt any of you would be able to,” I sneer, sheer revulsion causing me to speak the provocative words regardless of consequence. I back away into the space and past a row of boxes.

“You little bitch!” he hisses while lunging, but I pull the stack of boxes over, and his yelp of pain makes me smile.

I have no plan really, I’m not sure how I’ll get out of the locked door, but I won’t just sit back and let them rape me either. I’ll fight them with all that I have.

“Now, that wasn’t very nice, was it?” blue eyes teases with a quirk of his thin lips. My brows furrow as I note that one of the other men, a tall one with a bald patch and comb-over, is behind him, and Mr potbelly is on the floor, but I can’t see the fourth.

The breath whooshes out of me when arms wrap around me from behind.

“Gotcha,” a dark voice purrs in my ear, and I freeze, the sound of his voice like the whisper of mist on a gravestone. I know without any doubt that this one will make it hurt just because he can and that’s what gets him off. Blinking, dizziness threatens to overcome me as I try to struggle, to loosen his hold, but he’s just too strong and I’m too fucking weak.

“Get your filthy fucking hands off me, you cunt!” I scream, kicking my legs out and cursing myself for not joining the guys in training and asking for some self-defence moves.

“Now, now, petal. There’s no need to say such things. We’re all here for a bit of fun,” blue eyes croons, avoiding my kick aimed at his crotch. He grabs a leg, the tall comb-over man taking the other, and they carry me, wriggling and squirming, back to the bed.

“I will never stop!” I screech, trying to dislodge their grip, and I think that I might have gained a bit of space, but then white light fills my eyes as pain radiates down the side of my face.

“That’s better,” someone says while chuckling, and the ringing in my ears makes it sound like he’s underwater. My vision blurs, coming in and out of focus, and there’s a warmth that tickles down the side of my face.

“I think you hit her too hard,” another voice utters, and then I’m lowered, my hands raised above my head and secured with some kind of tie or rope, the material smooth yet unyielding. My legs are being pulled apart but I can’t seem to see what’s going on. It’s almost as if it’s happening to someone else, my mind detaching from the horror-filled reality before me.

Then the ripping of fabric fills the room, cool air drifting over my bare skin, and a shadow looms over me.

A grumble leaves my throat, but it soon turns into a scream of agony when fire races from the place between my thighs, my body jerking and moving and so beyond my control that I’m not sure whether or not this is a terrible nightmare. All the while my head pounds, my vision a blur as my mind shuts down.

All I know is that I am a being made of up indescribable pain, of an agony and anguish that goes soul-deep, and that it lasts for hours.

“LOVELY - SLOWED & REVERB” BY DENIAL

OCT

Heaving, the alcohol that I'd tried to drown myself in comes back up and lands in the toilet pan with a splatter. The tinkling of the running shower and frantic scrubbing has me turning as I slump on the floor, my brother, Kit, rubbing his skin raw with a pumice stone. His brows are dipped low, his jaw tight, and the steam that wafts from the shower, the way his body is colored crimson, tells me he probably set the temperature to scalding.

I say nothing, just flush, strip off my boxers, and then join him. I hiss as the water touches me, knowing soon I'll be as red as a tomato.

"I can't get clean, Oct. Can't wash the smell of them off me," Kit says desperately, looking up at me with red-rimmed eyes, the whites showing.

"I know, brother," I reply with a sigh, my flesh itching with the bodily fluids that cover it, none of which are my own. We may have taken those fucking pills so we could put on a show, but not one of us came. We couldn't, not without her, our stepsister. Our soulmate.

Taking the pumice from him, I rub it up and down my arm, relishing the burn as I take some of the epidermis away. He grabs the shower gel—the bottle that was full this morning is half empty now—and squirts some into his palm before slathering it all over his raw skin, not even flinching.

We spend a few minutes washing ourselves, which doesn't do a fucking thing to make me feel clean. Instead, I feel tainted, dirty, and no amount of scrubbing will wash it off. I shut off the shower, Kit growling at me as I open the door.

"I wasn't done." His nostrils flare as anger heats his eyes.

"Yes, you were," I tell him, stepping out and grabbing a towel. "You know it won't help, and you'll just bleed more than you already are."

He looks down, seeing the blood dotting the surface of his arms, and inhales a sharp breath, as if he hadn't noticed that

he'd literally scrubbed himself raw.

"Fuck." He lets out a defeated sigh before getting out of the shower and grabbing the towel I hand him. "We should check on Cas and Prince."

I nod as I walk back into his room, seeing the pale light of dawn lighting up the sky. It feels wrong somehow, like it shouldn't be a new day. Like the nightmare of the past several hours can't be washed away with a sunrise either.

We throw on some sweatpants, then head to Prince's room as it's the closest. I don't knock, just open the door and stride in. Goosebumps pepper my skin, the chill of the room and the open balcony door telling me he's outside.

Sure enough, when we head out the door, we see him, his forearms resting on the metal railing, looking out at the sun as if it mortally offended him.

"Hey," I greet quietly, and he swings his head to look at me, making my steps falter. The skin around his eyes is bunched, his stare pained as tears make his emerald eyes sparkle and shine in the dawn's light. He looks fucking traumatised, like he doesn't want to see another sunrise, and moisture springs to my eyes when I see the anguish in his gaze. "Fuck, Prince."

I rush to him, pulling him in a fierce hug, and that seems to be his undoing as sobs soon rack his large body as he clutches at me, tugging me closer.

"I'm so fucking sorry, Oct," he croaks, his face buried in my neck.

"It's not your fault, you know that," I assure him, my voice thick as I hold him so close that I can feel each shudder from his body. My soul aches at seeing him blaming himself for something that's always been beyond his control. I would do anything to take the guilt he feels and throw it to the four winds, because I want him to look forward to the sunrise, each and every day.

"How can you believe that? I've let them fucking rape you since you were little more than children and—"

“No!” Kit comes storming over, grabbing hold of Prince and spinning him around. My twin clamps his hands on either side of Prince’s face, a fire in his stormy gaze that I’ve not seen before. “Your mother may be the biggest cunt that walks this earth, but that has nothing to do with you, Prince. You didn’t force us to do anything. We gladly fucked those women for years until we grew tired of old pussy and realized how much of a toll fucking for money takes on our soul, but none of that is on you.”

Prince tries to shake his head, and by the way Kit’s jaw clenches, Prince is about to argue.

“Ember didn’t blame you,” I say, pressing into his back, wrapping my arms around him from behind, and resting my chin on his shoulder. I need him to feel the truth of my words. He stills, barely breathing, so I forge on. “She knew it wasn’t your fault, and she loved you regardless of who your mom is, like we all do.”

He takes a huge, shuddering inhale, and I watch as Kit’s face crumples the moment Prince sags into him and cries. Tears fill my eyes and spill over, so I nestle my face into the side of Prince’s neck, and soon we’re all sobbing into each other, the anguish of years leaving him in a storm of sorrow.

After a few moments, we quiet, and I let go of Prince as he straightens up, sniffing and wiping his hand down his damp cheeks.

“I don’t know what I’d do without any of you,” he says in a rough tone, turning to face both of us. His eyes are bloodshot, his chest bare, and all his gorgeous ink is on display.

I’m not sure when we became closer than brothers, when our love grew into the kind that brings pleasure, but I’m forever grateful that it did. Otherwise, I’d never have known what it’s like to be held with affection and to be given pleasure because that act brings gratification to the giver.

“You too, Prince.” I dart forward and place a soft kiss on his full lips. He chuckles, swiping his tongue over mine, and

my body sings, the tension of the past few hours finally releasing and leaving me boneless.

His hand cups my cheek in a gesture that's so tender it brings fresh tears to my eyes, but this time they're not of sorrow. Pure love fills my heart, the emotion overflowing for the man in front of me, who's given so much to protect us all. Our tongues tangle languidly, neither of us having the energy for more than a sweet kiss between lovers and best friends.

"Thank you," he says softly against my lips before pulling back, and my lips split into a wide grin. It feels strange on my face, and I realised that it's been several days since I truly smiled.

"Thank you for always being here, big bro," I tell him, and he laughs again, swatting my ass as I dance away.

Kit goes up to him, and it's like watching a battle between two male lions as they size each other up. Kit is the only one of us who will make Prince bow, who can assert his dominance over our eldest stepbrother and win.

Something breaks between them, and then they're coming together in a clash of teeth and tongue, Prince's hand tangling in Kit's hair, shorter than my own but still long enough to be used as leverage. Kit growls when Prince tugs, his hand coming to the front of Prince's throat and gripping it tightly.

The crash of shattering glass above us has them pulling apart, but it's the cry of utter anguish that has my heart pounding, looking wildly around.

"Where the fuck is Cas?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“LISTEN BEFORE I GO” BY BILLIE EILISH

EMBER

I come to, my body screaming in agony as I move. The soft sound of fabric shifting underneath me has my eyes opening, my vision wavering in and out of focus as I blink and try to remember where I am and what happened.

Pins and needles in my hands have me bringing them down from above me, and it's then the dark memories surface; of my stepmother locking me in the attic with strange men, all with dead, soulless eyes, and of being chased around by those same men, one hitting me so hard I saw stars. My head throbs with the memory, but the pain doesn't stop the onslaught of trauma, and I'm thrown back into my mind, feeling my hands being raised and tied to the bed.

I blink the horrors away, knowing that if I stop and think about it, my walls will crumble and I'll be lost. Numbness is my best friend right now. Then I rub at my wrists, hissing and glancing down at them to see that they're no longer bound, but there are deep grooves etched into my flesh, as if whatever was used to tie me down cut into me, marking me.

My gaze focuses lower, and a small animal-like whine sounds from my ruined throat when I see the torn material of my T-shirt, one of Oct's that I'd been wearing when Odette locked me in here. I hate that it's ruined, my lip trembling at the waste of something that was such a comfort to me. Then my eyes focus on the red patches and bruises littering my

torso, but it's the sight further down that has bile filling my throat.

My leggings are gone, and I swallow hard, my entire body trembling when I spot the crimson mess between my thighs. The area pulses painfully now that I've seen it, and I suck in a sharp gasp when I shift again on the bed, agony flaring from the spot.

Flashes of memory assault me, and I flinch as my mind takes me back to last night, to the men who forced their way inside me. I jerk upright to a seated position, ignoring the excruciating pain and wetness underneath me as my frantic gaze takes in the room. Boxes are knocked over and old trinkets and belongings are strewn across the floor. I shiver, trying desperately not to fall back into the nightmare that lurks on the edges of my vision, threatening to claim me once more.

The light catches on something, making it sparkle and shine like a beacon, and my gaze travels over the smooth surface of the glass slipper that I found when I first explored the space. It feels like aeons ago, but I think it was only two or three days ago.

The shoe is broken, the heel a jagged edge that looks wicked sharp.

There's a way to make all of this stop, you know... my mind whispers just as another flashback hits me, and my hands go to my throat, the touch making me hiss as I meet tender flesh. The mean one with the voice that will feature in my darkest nightmares almost choked the life out of me. I gasp, blinking as the watery light of pre-dawn fills the room, the single bulb adding a sickly glow to everything.

And Odette will no longer have a hold on the guys. They tried to save you, and look what happened...

I can't stop staring at that glass fucking shoe, at the sharp edge I know would help me purge all these demons that won't leave me alone. Without thought, I rise, swinging myself to get up, only my legs buckle and I hit the wooden boards hard, my knees taking the brunt of my fall. Pain fills me, white-hot and

burning, and I fall to my hands, just trying to breathe through all the hurt.

Without you, they wouldn't have been hurt again and she wouldn't have been able to force them. Without you, she can never make them go through that pain, that horror again...

A part of me knows that the voice is wrong, that Odette was hurting the guys long before I came along, but I can't get the idea out of my mind now that the seed has been planted. When I open my eyes, the first rays of dawn are shining through the window, casting the broken shoe in light that seems celestial.

You will finally be free of all the pain, all the torment...

“But I'll never see them again,” I choke out, even as I crawl towards the object that fills my vision. My body is no longer mine to command, my hands seeking something my mind refuses to acknowledge fully.

And you think they'd want you after this? That they could love you after those men have been inside you?

I flinch, tears rolling down my cheeks, landing with soft splats on the dusty floorboards, too weak to argue with myself any longer. My breaths hitch in my chest, my chin trembling as tremors rack my broken body.

Then my eyelids flutter, my head bowing as I reach my destination, but I can't allow myself to sag into the feeling of relief because there is still one thing left to do.

There's only one way to set them free, to set all of you free, you know how...

Reaching out a shaking hand, I grasp the broken glass shoe around the wide part, the shattered heel glinting and shining like the answer to all my prayers.

Just two cuts, down the river, not across the stream...

Tears fill my eyes once more as I sit back on my sore arse, the throb of pain nothing compared to the lightness that is filling my veins now that I've made my decision.

“I’m sorry, Cas,” I whisper brokenly, bringing the sharp point to my left forearm. I know he’ll be hit the worst by this, after what happened with his parents. Hesitating for a moment, I worry that he’ll blame himself for this like I know a part of him still shoulders the burden of their deaths, but then I catch sight of my wrist, of the deep groove from the restraints that were used to hold me down while they...

A scream of soul-shattering agony rips through me as I slice downwards, blood immediately welling to the surface and dripping down my arm. I quickly swap hands and do the same with my other arm, the pain of my flesh parting quickly replaced with a wave of euphoria that has my nerves tingling.

Then my arms droop, the sound of the shoe falling to the floor a dull clatter as my body slumps against the boxes behind me.

Just a little bit longer and it’ll all be over.

“SLIP AWAY” BY UNSECRET, RUELLE

CAS

The breeze might be gentle, but when you’re climbing the side of a building, it feels as though it’s gale force, trying to pry me off. I relish the challenge, my body singing with each pull of my arms that takes me closer to my girl.

After the shitshow that was last night, the disgust I somehow hid as I was forced to fuck woman after woman, I couldn’t wait to get in the shower and rinse them off me. Like the others, I didn’t come, couldn’t orgasm with some stranger that I didn’t even want in the first place. Though washing couldn’t get rid of the itch, so I went out on the balcony to see if the pre-dawn air could help.

It was when I turned around, feeling like if I didn't I might try to throw myself off the edge, that I saw the trellis that was fixed to the wall, providing the perfect hand and foothold to climb up.

Not thinking about it, and with only the desperate need to see and feel Ember, I started my ascent, and here I am, grateful for my small dabble with parkour back in the States as the trellis soon ran out. Luckily for me, the coving moulding of this old place also helped, and before long, I'm at one of the dormer windows that I'm fucking hoping looks into the attic.

I notice a window further down slightly open, but I can't reach that, so I'll just have to hope that she's awake and can let me in through this one without me falling off the fucking roof.

The tiles creak under my feet as I shuffle along, peering inside to discover the room a mess, a bare lightbulb casting a yellow light over all the odd shapes. My heart fucking stops when I spot the bed, but Ember isn't in it. Instead, there's a patch of crimson in the middle, the covers mussed and hanging off the side.

Barely feeling my fingers gripping the sill anymore, I follow a small trail of blood, and when I find its end, a cry of pure animal-like anguish leaves my lips at the same moment that my hand punches through the glass of the window.

Uncaring of the cuts on my flesh, I pull the broken wood and glass aside, heaving myself up and through the window, then dropping to the floor in a heap but quickly bouncing back up and rushing to her side, landing hard on my knees.

"Cinders, baby, no, no, no," I beg, my voice panicked and unlike my usual deep timbre. Her face is so fucking pale, too fucking pale, and blood sluggishly pours from jagged cuts along her forearms, telling me she did this to herself.

"Cas?" her soft voice whispers, and I look away from the ruin of her arms to find her beautiful blue eyes looking up at me. She gives me a small, sad smile that shatters my already breaking heart. "The only way to free you, to free us all, was to take myself out of the equation. I'm sorry I broke my promise, Cas."

“I will not lose another fucking person to suicide. Please, Cinders, don’t leave me.” Tears drip down my cheeks as I hover over her, unable to take my eyes off her beautiful face but knowing that I’ll need to if I’ve got any chance of saving her.

Think, Cas! Fucking think!

I tear my gaze away from her, my eyes landing on the rumpled bed sheets, and with gargantuan effort, I force myself to get up and rip them off, tugging the fabric until it tears.

“You’re not allowed to leave me, Cinders,” I grit out, my voice harsh and thick as I rip a strip of fabric and then drop back to my knees beside her.

“It’s better this way, especially after...” she cuts off, her eyes closing as a tear drips down her pale cheek.

I swallow hard as I look beyond her slashed wrists, seeing her missing clothes, the bruises littering her skin, and the blood in between her legs. Rage unlike anything I’ve ever felt flows over me, so strong it’s almost calm, like the eye of a storm.

Odette broke her word, and she will pay. So will the dead men who hurt Ember, for I have no doubt that there was more than one of them.

Focus, Cas.

Pulling my gaze back up to her face, I take her arm in my hand and bind it tightly.

“I know it hurts, baby, but we need to stop the bleeding,” I tell her as her brows furrow, tying off the makeshift bandage and then ripping another strip of the sheet to bind her other arm.

My fingers are stained red by the time I’m done, and they’re shaking so badly it’s a wonder I managed the last knot. Taking a deep inhale, I slide my arms underneath her, picking her up as gently as I can. She still moans in pain, and my soul fractures at the sound, but I feel less frantic now that she’s bandaged up.

“It hurts so bad, Cas,” she whispers brokenly, her voice shredded, no doubt with the amount of screaming she did last night. Screaming that we didn’t answer. Odette isn’t the only one I can’t forgive. I include myself and the fact that I’ve failed her so badly in there too.

“I know, Cinders, but I’ll make it better, I swear,” I murmur, pressing a soft kiss to her head before striding towards the door. “Open the fuck up!”

I kick the door hard for good measure, ignoring the flash of pain that races up from my bare foot.

“What the fuck?” a deep male voice asks from the other side, and my blood fucking boils. Her guards will also pay for letting this happen to her. Anyone who was complicit dies.

The door swings open, but before he can do anything I’m pushing past him and racing down the old creaking staircase. I ignore his shout, too focused on getting Ember the help she needs. My heart pounds inside my chest, sweat dripping down my spine with sheer terror. I can’t lose her.

There’s a door at the end, and I don’t even bother trying the handle, just kick it with my foot, watching as it splinters off its hinges before crashing into the hallway beyond. The thudding footsteps behind me let me know that Odette’s guard followed us down, but I don’t give a fuck. He can’t take her from me, I’ll kill the motherfucker if he tries.

I vaguely register how fucking close she was this whole time, my jaw clenching with how near she was to us yet so out of reach. We thought we were keeping her safe by not trying to get to her, but we damned her instead.

“Prince!” I scream as I stride down the hall towards our wing. He rushes out of his room, the twins with him, their eyes wide and the whites showing. Then they stop when they spot Ember in my arms, and by the way Prince’s body jerks like he’s been shot, I’m guessing he saw her injuries too. “Call a fucking ambulance!” I yell over my shoulder, realizing that he was the one who told us that Ember was in the attic, the day Odette locked her away.

Fucking Odette has never given us phones, and as we only had each other it was never an issue. It's just something else she fucked us over with, but Ember's jailer can make himself useful and get her the help she needs.

The gruff sound of the guard's voice filters into the hall moments later, and a small measure of tension leaves me knowing help is on its way. Prince and the twins run up to me as I keep going, not stopping until I'm in her room and lying her down on the bed.

"Oh, Little Sis," Oct breathes out, tears making his eyes sparkle as he crouches on her other side.

"O-Oct?" she asks, but it's barely a sound, and my chest tightens. *Where's the fucking medics?*

"I'm here, baby. Kit and Cas too, Prince is getting help," he says, brushing her hair from her face. I hear Prince talking to the guard outside of the room, but I can't take my eyes off her almost lifeless form. My pulse roars in my ears at the blood, which is matted in her hair, his hand shaking as he hovers over her like he doesn't know where to touch her that won't cause her pain.

"They're on their way," Prince says as he strides into the room, his eyes on Ember lying in the bed, who is still looking far too pale. His inhale is ragged, his fists clenched around his phone as he stares at our lifeless soulmate. "She's gone too fucking far this time."

I know who he's talking about. Odette. The monster that we've been forced to call mother for too long.

"She has," Kit agrees, his own voice a husk of what it normally is. "And she will pay the price."

"Agreed," Prince, Oct, and I say together just as sirens wail in the distance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“HALF A MAN” BY DEAN LEWIS

PRINCE

I watch the rise and fall of her chest as the beep from the heart monitor fills the hushed silence of the private room. I breathe in time with her, knowing that I’ve failed her more than I’ve failed anyone else before and wishing that my heart would just stop beating.

That would be too easy though, too light a punishment for the sins that rest on my shoulders. So I stand sentinel, my brothers around her as we watch and wait.

Odette somehow got the ambulance to take Ember to a private hospital, and it’s the only thing I’m ever going to be grateful to her for because the care has been incredible. Well, the second thing I’m grateful to her for, the first lying in front of me, sedated to give her some rest.

Cas and I rode with her, the twins having to ride with Odette as Davis drove them here. The old driver stopped them before they left though, telling them to call him if any of us needed his services. He told them his loyalty is with Ember, not Odette, and then gave them his private number.

As her legal guardian, Odette is here but is in the waiting room. I think even she didn’t want to push us and insist that she be in here with Ember. It’s given the guys and I a chance to talk, and we’ve decided that with the obvious injuries from

her assault, we need to confess all to the cops when they turn up.

The door opens and I expect it to be police officers, but instead, the doctor who has been overseeing Ember's care walks in.

"How's our patient?" he asks in a hushed tone, walking over to her chart and taking it off the end of the bed.

"Same as before, doctor," I reply, Kit's hand tightening around her much smaller one as he holds it from his position next to the bed. Fuck, she looks so fragile lying here, white bandages wrapped around both forearms, her purple bruises stark against her pale skin. "When will she wake up?"

"Oh, in an hour or so, I imagine. Her body needs rest," he says kindly, placing her chart back on the bed.

"When will the cops be here?" Oct questions, voicing my thoughts from earlier. I know we're all eager to get Odette to pay for her crimes. My chest tightens with the thought that if we'd reported her years ago, Ember would never have been hurt.

"Police? I don't see why they need to be involved," the doctor replies, his brows dipped. "It was an attempted suicide, son. She needs medical help, maybe psychiatric, but not the law."

"What about the...r-rape?" Cas stammers from Ember's other side. He looks like a wreck, dark circles under his eyes and her blood still crusted under his short nails. It's no surprise really, this must be extra hard on him given what happened to his parents and that he was the one to find her.

"Rape? There were no signs of rape," the doctor answers, glancing away, and the hair stands on the back of my neck. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other patients to see."

We sit in stunned silence as he quickly leaves the room before any of us has even processed his words, the door shutting quietly behind him. My cheeks burn as soon as he leaves, amazed at his refusal that I didn't even argue with him, none of us did. Or maybe Odette has drilled into us not to

argue, to just take shit lying down. Either way, we keep failing Ember and it makes my stomach turn.

“What the fuck is he talking about?” Kit snarls, his voice rasping like the words hurt. His other hand indicates the purple marks around her throat and the fingerprint-shaped ones along her upper arms. “We know that happened, fuck, I could see how torn up she was. Those fucking bruises didn’t appear by themselves.”

Bile fills my throat as my hands clench into fists, realization making the edges of my vision go red. “Odette somehow covered it up.”

“The fuck?” Oct breathes. “How?”

“I don’t fucking know,” I growl out, running my hands through my hair and pushing off the wall where I’d been keeping vigil. “But at least this way we get to decide her punishment. Going to jail would have been too good for her.”

“She needs to hurt the way Ember did,” Cas murmurs softly, stroking the side of Ember’s face. My stomach dips when she doesn’t even twitch, let alone lean into his touch as she would have done before.

My phone vibrates, and I pull it out of my pocket to see an unknown number flashing on the screen.

“Prince,” I answer, my heart thudding inside my chest, knowing who it is before they even speak.

“*We have your information,*” Lucifer’s deep tone tells me, and chills race up and down my spine. “*Meet us tonight at ten, the skate park along Southbank.*” Then the line goes dead before I can say anything. My mind races, my nerves tingling at what they may have unearthed, and what impact that will have on my brothers.

“Who was that, Prince?” Oct asks, and I look up to find their eyes on me.

Swallowing and remembering Ember’s words telling me that it’s not my fault, I hold his gaze.

“Lucifer, from the Fallen.”

“The fuck!” Cas curses, letting go of Ember’s hand to stride over to me. “Why the fuck was Lucifer, one of the most feared members of the Fallen I might fucking add, calling you?”

We all know who they are, the secret society that deals in favours and can do just about anything you ask them as long as you pay the price. A sigh heaves from my chest. It’s now or never.

“I asked them to look into the deaths of your dads, after Robert’s supposed accident,” I tell him, watching as his eyes narrow then widen.

“What do you mean, ‘supposed?’” he questions, but I can see by the way his eyes race from side to side that he’s working it out. “You think she killed him? And our dads too?”

“Yes.” He staggers, and I glance beyond him to see Oct and Kit both sitting next to Ember, faces pale and shocked expressions in their eyes. “I think that it’s too much of a coincidence that all your dads died not long after she married them.”

“Shit,” Kit breathes out as he rubs his hand over his face, the other still gripping Ember’s tightly.

“I’m meeting Lucifer tonight to see what they managed to dig up,” I tell them.

“I’ll come,” Cas offers without missing a beat. “The twins can stay with Ember. We can’t leave her alone. Never again.”

“We’ll stay. Just come back right away and tell us what they find, yeah?” Oct says, holding my stare.

I give him a nod, my gaze sliding back to the woman lying in the bed, the other part of my soul that is hurt because of me. How can I believe that none of this is my fault? And if it turns out that Odette, my fucking mother, killed all their fathers, what then?

I lower my eyes, unable to look at any of them, at what my lack of action has caused. Large hands cup my cheeks, bringing my head back up, and copper eyes that are dull stares deep into mine.

“Whatever we find is not on you, Prince,” Cas assures me, his thumb soothing over my skin. “This is all her evil, you are not responsible for that.”

I swallow, my eyes stinging as my jaw works.

“I’m so sorry, Cas,” I whisper, the words barely audible.

“You do not need to apologize,” he tells me, his voice unwavering. “Remember what Ember told you? It’s not your fault. None of it is.” He brings our foreheads together, our lips so close that we share breaths. “And we will make Odette pay in blood and pain for all the sins she’s committed against us and ours.”

I let the wave of pure rage at the sound of her name flow over me like a soothing balm. It burns away some of the self-loathing I feel, lending me strength and focusing my mind. He’s right, the person who needs to pay the most is waiting outside, and I will dole out the punishment with my bare hands if I have to.

Then I will spend the rest of my life making it up to the people in this room. The people who mean more to me than anything else in this life. That is my vow, my pledge.

You will not go unavenged.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“WHAT WAS I MADE FOR?” BY BILLIE
EILISH

EMBER

B *eep. Beep. Beep...*

The sound infiltrates the dark and drags me away from the blissful nothingness into a world full of aches. My eyelids flutter, but I'm unable to open them fully because they're just so bloody heavy right now. Though there's a pressure on my hand that has my fingers twitching.

“Little Sis?” a familiar voice whispers, the note of desperation mixed with relief making my chest feel tight. “Kit, I think she's waking up.”

Kit...Oct...the twins.

It takes a tremendous effort to force my dry eyes open, but it's worth it when I'm met with clear blue orbs, the colour of a tropical sea.

“Oct?” The word hurts, and my tongue licks my dry lips before the rim of a plastic cup is pressed against them a moment later. I look away from Oct to drown in stormy blue eyes as Kit holds the cup to my lips.

“Drink, Pretty Thing,” he orders in barely a breath, and I don't miss the way his hand trembles as he urges me to drink the water.

Cool liquid fills my throat, and before I realise, it's all gone, my mouth feeling less like a desert.

“Better?” Oct questions as Kit pulls the empty cup away, and I nod.

“Where am I?” I ask, lifting my hand to brush some hair away from my face. I still as the white bandage comes into view, covering me from elbow to wrist, the beeping sound getting faster as my heart thrashes inside my chest.

Tearing my gaze away, I peek up into Oct’s beautiful eyes, but they’re not the happy, carefree light colour that I know. Instead, they’re full of anguish, of terror, and...guilt.

Memories slam into me with the force of a truck and the sound of a keening animal overtakes the beeping. Hands holding me down, a blow to my head... Pain, so much pain that I’m drowning.

“We’re here, baby. You’re safe,” Kit assures me, the bed dipping in the front and back as they sandwich me between them. A summer meadow mixes with lime and mimosa as they engulf me in their arms, and it helps to calm my racing pulse a little.

I scream when the door flies open and a strange man strides in. My entire body goes hot, then ice-cold, tremors making my abused body ache as I bury my face into Oct’s chest.

“Get the fuck out!” Oct roars as I shudder in his arms. “She’s fucking terrified of you!”

“I need to check if she’s okay,” the man says, his voice loud over my whimpers, but I ignore him, gripping the front of Oct’s shirt in my clenched fists tighter as I hyperventilate.

“If you cared, you’d stop denying what happened to her. Now fuck off and send a woman in here,” Kit sneers, his arm around me from behind as he aligns our bodies so close that not a breath of air lies between us.

My body relaxes slightly, knowing that the twins will keep me safe, that they are not like those other men who hurt me.

“Shhh, Little Sis, we’ve got you,” Oct murmurs, placing a kiss to the top of my trembling head. “He’s gone now, baby.”

As my body relaxes further, the aches from before turn sharp, agony along both forearms and between my legs, my head and around my throat. Hazy memories try to push through again now that the threat has left the room, but I shove them down deep, not ready to face them just yet.

“Ember, sweetheart, the nurse is here. Can she check your vitals?” Kit asks, shifting like he’ll move.

A cry leaves my lips, and then he’s back pressed against me in an instant, his arms wrapping around me once more before his hands smooth down my side.

“Maybe you boys can help?” a soft feminine voice suggests, and I nod into Oct, still not ready to face the room.

“We can do that. What do we need to do?” Oct questions, and they spend the next few moments helping to take my blood pressure and temperature before taking out the wires and the drip that I no longer need.

I keep my face pressed against Oct, taking gulping breaths of his summery scent into my lungs, letting it calm my racing pulse.

“All done now, Ember. I’ll leave you to rest and be back with some food in a bit,” the feminine voice says, and seconds later, there’s the soft sound of the door closing.

“It’s just us now, sweetheart,” Kit whispers as he presses a light kiss on my cheek. My eyelids droop, all the adrenaline leaving me exhausted.

“Rest now, Little Sis. We’ll keep watch,” Oct assures me as my eyes close fully. “We’ll never leave you alone again.”

“DEMONS” BY JACOB LEE

CAS

Prince and I wait in the cold wet night, the skatepark along the river deserted. *Why the fuck does it rain so much in England?*

I glance at my watch, noting that it's nine-fifty-nine and they're not here yet. I would have thought that they would be early, given their revered reputation.

The sound of footsteps rings out, and I glance up to see three figures emerging from the misty darkness. All the hair stands on end along my arms under my coat when they pass by a streetlamp and I see black masks covering their faces, rendering them completely unrecognisable.

My pulse thuds as they get closer. They look like apparitions, dark demons waiting to take our souls, and that's exactly what Prince promised them; a favour at some unspecified time in the future. It could be as simple as gathering some intel, or they could ask us to kill someone, you never know with these guys.

They stop a couple of feet in front of us, the guy in the middle stepping forward. It's funny, I'd always believed there were four Fallen to each sect or group, but rumour has it that this sect, Lucifer's group, lost one of its members last year and no one knows why or how.

"Prince, Caspian," a dark voice greets us from the man in front.

"Lucifer." Prince inclines his head respectfully, and I copy the move. You don't disrespect the Fallen and expect to come away still breathing. Adrenaline makes my muscles tense, my pulse rapid as I straighten.

Lucifer reaches into a briefcase that I hadn't realized he was holding before pulling out a black folder.

"This is the information you asked for, but in short, there seems to be several coverups with the deaths of Richard Everly, Brant Johnson, and Michael Scott." My heart explodes inside my chest, my fingers clenching into fists at his words, at the truth of what that bitch did to my dad, to all our dads. "The autopsy reports all suggest interference of some kind, suggesting they did not die of natural or accidental causes."

Prince takes the folder, his nostrils flared. There's a slight tremble in his hand as he pulls the folder close.

"Thank you, Lucifer," he chokes out, and my brows furrow when I glance at the stoic leader to see him reaching into the briefcase and pulling out several other folders. "What are they?"

"All the evidence of the parties Odette threw, the payments into her accounts, and a USB with videos that she took during the parties," Lucifer states, his tone completely devoid of emotion as he hands one folder to Prince. Nausea swirls in my stomach, bile burning my throat at the knowledge that there are videos of us fucking all those women. That was not something I knew was happening. Then he holds out another folder. "This is the true and final last Will and Testament of Robert Everly."

"What?" Prince's voice is a rasp, and I can barely hear it over the blood rushing past my ears.

"It states that Ember Everly was his sole heir and that his business was, in fact, thriving. Congratulations, she's a very wealthy young woman."

"Fuck," I whisper, and Lucifer's masked face turns to gaze at me. It's disconcerting, but the shock at having learned the depth of Odette's deception makes it seem like it has less impact. Finding out that we didn't need to go through everything we just did is going to be a bitter pill to swallow. Then he holds out the final folder.

"The names and addresses of the four men who raped your stepsister," Lucifer states casually as he presents the last black folder to Prince, and for a moment, I can't breathe, can't hear past the rushing of the wind in my ears.

"How did you know?" Prince asks, his voice darkness personified as he takes the folder.

The side of Lucifer's lip quirks up, the only part of his face not covered by his mask. "No charge for that one or the others, just one favour owed as agreed."

He shuts the case, then turns his back on us and strides away past the other two masked men.

“Make it hurt,” the one on the left says, his hair pitch-black in the dark. His voice is fucking scary, a low rasp like a rattlesnake’s just before it strikes.

“Then fuck her in their blood,” the one on the right suggests, his tone light and playful like his almost grey hair which shines silver in the moonlight before they follow Lucifer and leave us in the dark.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“ONCE UPON A DREAM” BY LANA DEL REY

EMBER

There’s no incessant beeping when I next wake up, and warmth surrounds me, letting me know that I’m safe, that the twins are still here. My muscles relax, my body sinking into the comfort that theirs give me.

Opening my eyes, I find the room dark, though the light around the blackout curtains tells me it’s daylight.

“Hello, sleeping beauty,” Oct murmurs in a deep, husky voice that sends goosebumps cascading over my skin.

“W–what time is it?” I ask, my voice scratchy and sounding like I smoke forty cigarettes a day. I wince, swallowing to ease the ache.

“Here, Cinders.” A plastic cup of water is being held by Cas as he leans over the side of the bed and Kit, who is also awake.

Shuffling up on the bed and ignoring the twinges of pain that emit from my various wounds, I sit up enough to take the cup and drink it down.

“Thanks,” I croak, my throat still sore even after the refreshing drink.

“Always,” Cas says, leaning down and placing a soft kiss on my forehead. Tears sting my eyes at the tender gesture, and reaching up, I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him

closer. The cup hits the floor with a soft thud as his arms encase me, no doubt squashing Oct, but I need to hold Cas right now.

“I’m so sorry, Cas,” I whisper, the lump in my throat having nothing to do with the pain of my injuries. “I couldn’t see another way, but I’m glad you found me.”

Sobs rack my body as the thought that I almost lost them, by my hand, comes crashing down on me. I would never have held Cas again, never seen Oct’s smile or Prince’s scowl, and never felt Kit hold me like he is now. Even if what happened in that attic will haunt me for the rest of my life, for the first time in a long time, I’m not alone, and I almost gave all that up. Almost let Odette win.

“Shhhh, Little Cinders. It’s okay. You’re here now and that’s all that matters,” Cas soothes, though his voice is thick with emotion too as his arms tighten around me. He holds me like he is terrified I’ll slip away, and I can’t blame him.

“We’ll never let you go, Little Sis,” Oct assures me thickly, his arms around me too until all three of them are touching me, comforting me like they have done from the first moment I met them.

My sobs soon subside, and pulling away, my brows dip when I see Prince across the room, anguish written across his features.

“Prince?”

Cas steps back, giving me an unobstructed view of Prince. He looks broken, his shoulders slumped, his hands clawed into fists, and the skin around his eyes bunched.

“It’s me who should be apologizing, not you,” he rasps, the words harsh and cutting. “If I’d done more, this never would have happened. Fuck, Sugar. I’m so fucking sorry.” Tears glisten in his eyes, making the green sparkle and shine like gems even in the low light of the room.

“Oh, Prince,” I breathe out, my throat becoming even tighter as he just stands there. I want to get up and go to him,

but my exhausted body can't move just yet. "Please come here."

The twins get out of bed, my heart giving a thud at the loss of their warmth, but something in my gaze and the way my body tenses up must convince Prince because he's striding across the room in seconds, drawing me into his arms and pulling me close.

I breathe him in, his leather and spiced rum scent washing over me like a soothing balm for my soul. My eyes close as the tension leaves my limbs, a huge breath fanning against his skin.

"This is not your fault, Prince," I tell him, my face buried against his neck as I inhale his scent. "You are not to blame for your mother's sins."

His arms tighten around me, pain flaring from my various hurts, but I don't stop him. I need the anchor he's providing as much as he needs to give it.

"I will atone for them anyway, darlin'," he whispers, pulling away so that I'm looking into his eyes. One of his arms releases me, coming up to cup my cheek. "I will make all of this right, I swear it."

Before I can argue and tell him he doesn't need to shoulder the burden alone, his lips touch mine in the softest caress. My entire body lights up as it relaxes, like it knows that we are home in his arms, his lips pressed against mine.

My tongue darts out, seeking an entry, which he gives me with a masculine groan, his own coming to dance with mine. His kiss is everything I need; a promise to get revenge and an apology for not stopping that awful night from happening. I forgive him with every swipe of my tongue, telling him with my lips that he is not alone and that I will be by his side from now on. No more trying to take the easy way out.

He ends the kiss with small pecks on my lips, shivers rolling across my skin at the light touch. I'm not ready for anything more yet, but a small amount of relief flows through

me knowing that their touch doesn't send me into a panic. It gives me hope that the attic has not ruined me completely.

"I love you, Ember Everly," he whispers against my lips.

"I love you back, Prince," I reply, placing one last kiss on his plush lips.

"But if you ever hurt yourself like that again, I will spank you so hard, Sugar, you'll not be able to sit down for months." I blink at his harsh tone, then my mouth tilts up into a small smile.

"Not a deterrent, Prince," I say, and heat flares in his emerald eyes, making them shine for a different reason. "Now, can you help me to the bathroom? I need a wee."

He chuckles, and the sound is like walking outside in the sunshine after the harshest winter.

"Anything for you, my love."

After Prince helps me to the bathroom and refuses to leave even when I sit down on the toilet—domineering bastard—I tell him he can make himself useful by helping me in the shower. I need to wash the last few days from my skin, and even though it looks like someone has taken the worst of the blood off, I still feel unclean.

I feel so much better once I'm dried and in a new hospital gown, although the way Prince's jaw clenched as he catalogued every bruise with fire in his eyes made it difficult to live in the denial my mind wants to at the moment. I know that I'll need to face what happened head-on at some point, just not right now.

Prince has just finished helping me back into bed when the door opens and a female doctor walks in, Odette at her side. The tension in the room ratchets until I can barely breathe, or that could be because of seeing her for the first time since my attack, an attack she not only orchestrated but profited from.

"Get the fuck out," Prince growls, matching sounds of displeasure coming from the other boys as Odette stands there wide-eyed.

“I just want to check—”

“I don’t want her in here,” I tell the doctor, tearing my gaze away from Odette and pretending like she doesn’t exist. “That’s my right as the patient, isn’t it?”

“Of course, Ember,” the doctor agrees, turning to Odette. “Can you wait outside please, Mrs Everly?”

Odette’s left eye twitches, but that’s the only sign that she’s pissed. “I’ll be just outside.”

We all watch as she leaves, and a small fissure of satisfaction lifts my lips in a smile at the power I just had over her. *Take that, bitch.*

“Now, how are you feeling, Ember?” the doctor asks, taking my notes from the bottom of the bed and looking over them.

“Still quite sore, especially...” I trail off, and a deep sigh leaves her lips as she pats my leg in comfort.

“I think all being well, you should be able to go home in the next day or two after talking to one of our councillors about what happened with a referral for some counselling sessions that I strongly advise you to take.” Her tone is gentle, yet firm, and I nod, knowing that actually speaking to someone about what happened might be the best road to recovery. “Normally, we’d advise a stay in one of our mental health support units, but given the...circumstances, I think we can let you home for your recovery. I’ll get the nurse to bring you some medication for the pain.”

With a last squeeze of my leg, she leaves, and Odette peers in before the door closes again.

“Well, at least she didn’t outright deny what happened like that other asshole,” Oct states with a huff, and my forehead wrinkles.

“What do you mean?” I ask him, an uneasiness crawling along my spine.

Prince heaves a sigh before taking my hand. “When you first woke up, you were out of it and the doctor, a male doctor,

came in here to check on you,” he tells me, his hand holding mine, his thumb tracing circles across my skin. Nausea tingles in the corners of my mouth, the idea of an unknown man in here whilst I was so vulnerable making my breaths pant. The only reason for me not having a full-blown panic attack right now is because I know the guys haven’t left me alone, that they were here to keep me safe. “We asked about the cops and when they were going to get here.”

“Okay,” I say, unsure where he’s going with this but knowing that it won’t be good by the way his shoulders cave in a little. A chill settles over me, my stomach quivering as I wait to hear what he says next.

“He told us there was no need for the law to get involved because it was an attempted suicide and nothing else.” His green eyes bore into mine, his brows deeply furrowed as he waits for me to absorb the information.

“What?” My skin prickles as a coldness hits my centre. How can they deny what happened to me? It’s written all over my body in shades of purple and red, in the pain that throbs from the most intimate of places.

“He denied they had raped you, Cinders,” Cas says, coming up to my other side and taking my frozen hand in his warm one, pressing it to his lips.

“How?” I question, taking a deep breath as the murky memories try to resurface. “I can feel the stitches in my pussy, Cas. How can they say nothing happened?”

His jaw tightens, and he doesn’t need to answer for me to know the truth.

Odette.

She somehow made it so that no record of what happened exists. My skin flushes hot, rage chasing the cold away as my blood flows to my extremities. That. Fucking. Bitch.

“That’s not all, Sugar,” Prince adds quietly, and I swing my gaze back to him. He looks tortured, his jaw a solid line. “She lied about your father’s Will.”

“The fuck?” I hear Kit exclaim, but I can’t look away from Prince as he goes on, my heart racing.

“His business was flourishing, darlin’. There was no debt and you are his sole heir. You’re rich, Ember. Shit, you probably never have to work a day in your life if you don’t want to.” His jaw is tight, his nostrils flared as he speaks.

The breath punches out of me and I’m beyond grateful for being in bed because I would have fallen down if I’d been standing. A cry of anguish has my head snapping to the side to see Oct in Kit’s arms, tears streaming down his face.

“Oct?” I whisper as there’s an ache behind my eyes, and then it hits me. That night wasn’t just awful for me. They had to go through it too, maybe in a less violent way, but it must haunt them just as bad as it does me.

“I’m going to fucking kill her,” Kit seethes while holding his brother, his own eyes glassy and his body bristling and trembling.

I want to get out of bed and go to him, hold them all as we mourn everything that we’ve lost because of this woman, but my body won’t comply, and a noise of pained frustration leaves my lips.

“Kit, Oct, she needs you,” Prince commands, and my body sags, some of the tension draining from my muscles as the twins immediately come to me, climbing back into the bed and pulling me close until all I can feel and smell is them.

“All of that for nothing,” Oct breathes out against the top of my head. I pull back, enough so I can look into his eyes, my palm cradling his damp cheek.

“That which doesn’t kill us,” I say softly, knowing that really, this has brought us closer, strengthened us. That’s the only way I can look at it right now. Anything else and I won’t stop screaming.

“Only makes us stronger,” he replies, bringing his lips down to mine. I taste our sadness, our despair as we press our lips together and take comfort from each other.

“There’s more, Cinders,” Cas whispers, and I turn to face him, noting how ashen his complexion is. “She—” He pauses, swallowing before briefly closing his eyes as I wait for the next axe to fall. “It appears as though she orchestrated the death of your father. Of all our fathers.”

All the breath leaves me, whooshing out of my lungs until I’m empty. Silent tears track down my cheeks, a numbness settling over me at the number of blows I’ve just been dealt with. She took everything; she took my father, my one constant away, and for what? For his money?

A rasping breath in front of me brings me back to the present, and a sob at my back reminds me she may have taken my dad, but she also gave me four new protectors.

I’ve a feeling we’ll need to be strong for what lies ahead. Odette will be punished, she will answer for her crimes, and we have something that she doesn’t. We have each other, and for that, I am beyond grateful.

It’s a thought that brings a small smile to my lips and air into my lungs as Oct pulls away.

“What’s that for, Little Sis?” he asks, his thumb tracing my lips, his face less full of desolation than it was a moment ago.

“She brought about her own destruction. We might never have found each other if not for her scheming, and you guys might never have got free from her clutches. So in a way, I suppose we should be a little grateful, fucked up as it sounds.” My nose wrinkles at that, but it is true. I might still have my father, but I wouldn’t have the four of them in my life, and the idea of them not being here fills me with dread.

“We would have found you, Pretty Thing,” Kit murmurs from behind me. “It may have taken time, but we were always meant to be together.”

“And it won’t earn her any mercy,” Prince states, his voice ice-cold. I look beyond Oct’s shoulder to find Prince still there, standing next to the bed, his face set in hard lines.

“She will pay, Little Cinders. We have enough on her to send her down for a long time, and with your riches, we can

finally break her spell,” Cas says from behind me, and I twist to find him on the other side of the bed.

“It’s yours, Cas, however you need it.”

He gives me a smile, one that warms me to my toes, and I know we are no longer powerless. We have everything we need to take her down, to seek revenge for the wrongs she’s done us.

Checkmate, step-motherfucker.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“BAD DREAMS - STRIPPED” BY FAUZIA

KIT

Ember falls asleep again, her poor body exhausted. My muscles tense, heat washing through me at the fucking bombshell that Prince dropped earlier. Everything we went through that awful night, that Ember went through, was for fucking nothing, and our father’s death...I have to set that to one side for now to focus on what we need to do next.

We failed Ember so badly, and I’m not sure how any of us will come back from that.

“The Will and our dads wasn’t all we learned,” Prince whispers after calling us from Ember’s bed. She whimpered when we left, but we didn’t want to disturb her with our talking so we’re in a huddle on the other side of the room, all of us looking back with furrowed brows at the way she tosses on the bed.

“What else?” I grit out, not sure I can deal with any more surprises.

“We have the names and addresses of the men who...hurt her,” Cas tells us, and I go still, the sound of my blood rushing in my ears deafening in the silence.

“They need to die,” Oct states, his voice darker than I’ve ever heard it. I’m nodding my head, even as I swallow hard. Mass murder isn’t something I ever thought I’d commit, but as

a small wounded whimper sounds from our stepsister, I know I would kill a thousand people to keep her safe.

“Oh, they will hurt, brother,” Prince vows, his green eyes hard and cutting.

“What’s the plan?” I question, my palms sweating even as a fluttering, empty feeling fills my stomach.

“We trick them into thinking there’s another party, get them all in one place,” Prince tells us, and my forehead wrinkles.

“Where?” My mind races with the possibilities but comes up empty.

“I want to be there,” Ember’s soft voice floats over to us, a thread of steel in her tone. My heart gives a painful thud inside my chest as we turn to face her, finding her sitting up in bed, the sheets crumpled in her small hands. I don’t want her anywhere near those disgusting pigs. Knowing that she had to face them all alone before is enough to make my blood boil. She shouldn’t have to deal with them again.

“Sugar,” Prince starts, taking a step towards her, but she shakes her head, cutting him off and stopping him where he is.

“I deserve to get revenge on them too, Prince. A—after what they did to me, I want to make sure they can do nothing like that again.” Her jaw is set, and my chest tightens knowing that we won’t be able to convince her not to be part of this.

Prince takes a huge inhale, then his shoulders slump. “Fine, although I’m stating now that I fucking hate this.”

“Be that as it may, Prince. I will take back the control they stole from me.” She’s so fierce as she says the words, her spine straight, and my lips tug up into an appreciative smile. The tightness in my chest eases as I realise just how strong our girl is. She’s been through Hell, been baptised in pain, and has come out the other side swinging.

Do I want her to get her hands dirty? No, but she’s right. She deserves this more than any of us.

“Do you have any suggestions, Little Sis?” Oct asks, a feral gleam in his eyes as he strolls over to her. He takes her hand in his and presses a kiss to her knuckles. I follow the psycho bastard, knowing that he’s getting off on this, on the idea of her seeking retribution on her enemies.

“We invite them back to the house,” she says, looking at each of us, Prince and Cas coming up on the other side of her bed. “And then we burn it the fuck down with them inside.”

“KEROSENE” BY RACHEL LORIN

EMBER

A chill races up my spine as the words leave my mouth, but there’s a rightness to them I feel deep in my soul. Those men, those monsters deserve to die, and a cleansing by fire seems appropriate.

Prince raises his dark brows, an almost impressed gleam in his eyes making the green shine. “And Odette?” he asks, his low tone caressing my skin.

I pause, my eyes wide as I realise he’s letting me decide her fate too, when he has more reason than I to see her fall. Blinking, I think about what punishment would be fitting for the crimes she’s committed.

“Death is too good for her,” I tell him, not looking away for a single moment. He nods. “We hand over all our evidence and she can rot in prison for the rest of her miserable life, thinking about everything that she’s lost and knowing that she’s now powerless and will never have control over you again. And the women who took advantage of you will be exposed too, they don’t get to walk away because they had to have known what they did was all kinds of fucked up.”

“We’d need to go public with what she put us through,” Oct murmurs, and my heart hurts for them.

“You have nothing to be ashamed about, Oct. You were abused, underage teens when she first got you selling your bodies. This is on her, and no one will think badly of you.” I take his hand and press a kiss to his lips.

“And if they do,” Kit adds, placing a hand on Oct’s shoulder. “Fuck ‘em. Their opinions are worthless.” Oct nods, his jaw tight, but a resolute fire is burning in his blue eyes.

“Plus, we can always organize for Odette to be shanked if we grow bored,” Cas interjects, and my brows shoot up, a bark of laughter bursting from my mouth. My free hand flies up to cover my lips, some part of me realising that this isn’t a time for laughter. He winks, legit winks at me like a fucking rogue.

“How is this our life now?” I ask, lowering my fingers and biting my lips to repress the very inappropriate giggles that threaten to take over.

“So it’s agreed?” Prince interjects, and all eyes turn to him. “We deal with Odette, expose her crimes and those involved, and then those dead men walking?”

A part of me knows that this is wrong, that I shouldn’t be planning the murder of four people and the ruination of a fifth. There’s the brief flash of worry that I’ll never be the same afterwards. Taking a life is not something that doesn’t leave you unmarked, but then, having your voice stolen and your body violated leaves its mark too.

Those men broke me that night. They took with no thought to my well-being. No idea that there would be consequences to their heinous actions. And it’s this new me, the one who has seen and experienced the monsters of this world firsthand, that dips my head as butterflies riot in my stomach.

“Agreed.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“STEADY NOW” BY NILU

EMBER

The next couple of days are some of the longest of my life while we wait for the doctor to give me the okay to be discharged from hospital.

The guys take turns going back to the house to gather some personal things and have showers, but they all elect to stay with me overnight, and although I'm beyond grateful for their steady presence, I can't help feeling the stickiness of guilt every time I look at the dark circles under their eyes.

They don't see Odette at all when they return, it's like she's in hiding as she's not at the hospital either, and I can't help a slight chill spreading over my body as I wonder what she's planning, because there is no doubt in my mind that she is planning something.

I contact my father's old lawyer, John Fowcett, and he stops by the hospital with a criminal prosecution lawyer friend to listen to the guys' stories about what she's done. Although both their faces are deathly pale as Prince, Cas, Oct, and Kit recount their experiences, the two men listen to all of it with sympathy shining in their eyes, then afterwards run through all the charges that we could bring against Odette.

I wince when they mention controlling prostitution for gain, but that's exactly what Odette did to the guys. She forced them into selling themselves for her own gain, living off

immoral earnings. They even speak about trafficking, and the fact that the guys were so young counts as sexual exploitation of children, but as it was in America, Odette will have an international arrest warrant issued and be extradited back to the US.

We don't tell them what happened to me as I'm not sure they'd condone our plan to deliver the four men to the Grim Reaper, so it's best we leave them out of it.

There's silence when they leave, and we all look around at each other with wide eyes.

"So, it's really happening then?" Oct whispers, Prince shifting to take him into his arms and pulling him in for a hug.

"She won't be able to control us anymore," Prince says, and tears sting my eyes at the way Oct's chest hitches and he buries his face into Prince's chest.

I climb out of bed, making my way over to them and wrapping my arms around Oct from behind.

"She will never hurt you, any of you, again," I assure them in a choked voice, the lump in my throat hard to swallow after everything that I heard. I knew the bare bones of their story, but hearing all the details, seeing all the transactions that took place at their expense has left my soul sore and my heart broken for them.

Strong arms surround me, the tart scent of crisp apples and sweet caramel engulfing me.

"Us, Cinders. She'll never hurt any of us again. We're free," Cas urges, and Oct's back heaves against my front as a deep sob tears from him. Burning tears track down my cheeks as Kit joins us and we all hold each other, Oct's quiet sobs the only sound in the hushed silence.

I wake up lighter than I've felt for a long time, the knowledge that we are taking back control settling in my

chest and easing the tightness that has been there ever since that terrible night.

“You ready to go home, Cinders?” Cas asks, his tone husky as he shuffles beside me. They’ve each taken turns to sleep in the bed next to me, and I’m beyond grateful because it’s the nights that are the worst, memories assaulting me in my dreams, turning them into the worst kind of nightmares.

I turn on my side, looking into his beautiful copper eyes. They shine brighter than they have in a long while, and I can’t help but reach my hand out, brushing aside the walnut-coloured hair that has fallen into one of them.

“Yes and no,” I confess in a whisper, not wanting to wake the others who are all sprawled in chairs around the room. “I’m not sure it’ll ever be home, not after...” I can’t finish the sentence, my mind refusing to go there, shying away from what happened. I know I’ll have to face it eventually, but I’m unsure whether I can right now, so I shove it down in the box that seems to be almost overflowing with all the things that I can’t face.

“It’s okay to not be okay, Ember,” he tells me gently, his hand coming up to cup my cheek. “And if you never want to go back there again, we will find somewhere else to stay. And it’ll only be for a little while until we’ve dealt with those assholes.”

My breath catches and my chest aches with how much I love him, love all of them. They accept me, warts and all, and they are always here for me no matter what. Before I can verbalise that, there’s a knock on the door.

My heart quickens, its beat becoming loud as whoever it is doesn’t wait and comes into the room.

“Miss Everly,” the female doctor, Doctor North, whispers, and I sit up. The guys mumble around me as they wake up, but all I can do is focus on the way her face is pinched into tight lines, her jaw clenched hard.

“Y–yes?” I whisper, movement behind her catching my gaze. My scalp prickles as I spot two men behind her dressed

in navy blue scrubs, and suddenly, it's like I can't take a full breath. Cas's arm comes around me and pulls me close, but I can no longer feel the warmth that I know is there.

"These two gentlemen are here to take you to Serene Haven Mental Health Centre where you'll complete your recovery and get the help that you need," she tells me, and the guys curve around me, Cas's arm tightening.

"B—but you said I could go home?" I ask softly, my breathing shallow as I try to make sense of what's happening. She licks her lips, looking away for a moment before coming back to me, her face soft and her hands in her pockets as she shuffles on her feet.

"Things have changed, Ember. It was felt that you needed some extra help. Serene Health really is a lovely place, and their holistic approach is exactly what you need to help develop healthier coping skills—"

"Bullshit!" Prince roars, interrupting her and standing in front of the doctor, his body vibrating. "Ember needs us, not some fucking strange place away from everyone who loves her."

"Mr Brown!" she exclaims in a gasp, her hand flying to her chest, and the men enter the room behind her, stepping up beside her as if they would restrain him. "This is the best course of treatment for Ember, and if you care about her—"

"She's my very soul, you bitch!" he sneers, and I leap out of bed just as the men reach for him.

"Stop!" I cry out, rushing up to him and grabbing his arm. Locking eyes with Dr North, I give her a nod. My racing heart calms a little, the knowledge of what I have to do is so obvious now that I've thought of it. "Please, can I have a few minutes to say goodbye?"

Her face softens before she replies, "Of course." Then she turns, quietly opening the door and ushering the two men out before closing it again.

"Sugar, I won't let them fucking take you," Prince hisses, his body thrumming with restrained violence while still

looking at the door as if he will fight anyone who comes through it.

“Look at me, Prince,” I say softly, stepping in front of him and cupping his face in my palm. “Please.”

He tears his eyes away from the door, looking down at me, and the anger swirling in the emerald depths makes my breath catch.

“Maybe...” I swallow, taking an inhale and slowly blowing it out of my mouth. “Maybe this isn’t a bad thing.” He rears back and I grip his face tightly to keep him facing me. The others hover around us, but I don’t look away from Prince, holding his gaze even though I know my words hurt him. “I always run from things, Prince. M—my mother’s death, my father’s, a—and what happened that night.” I take another inhale, tears gathering in my eyes. “I’m so tired of running, Prince. So tired of feeling weak.”

“You’re not fucking weak,” he grits out, his fists clenching at his sides. It hurts that he doesn’t touch me, but I forge on, knowing that I need to say this. Need to admit to myself the hard truth that I’ve refused to acknowledge for far too long.

“I almost lost you all because that was the only path I could see, Prince. I tried to take my life because I couldn’t see another way,” I confess, my voice small and broken. “And I don’t want to believe that I’d do that again...but I can’t trust myself not to if things get too hard.” I look into his eyes, tears swimming in mine, and beg him to understand.

His nostrils flare with the deep breath he takes, his jaw clenching. “But you’ll be without us, alone, and I can’t protect you if you’re not with me.” His voice is thick, his gaze falling as his head drops forward.

“I need to learn to protect myself first, Prince,” I whisper, using my grip on his face to bring his eyes back to mine. “And it won’t be forever. Just a little while.”

“Fuck, Sugar,” he rasps, pulling me in close, engulfing me in his spiced rum scent and calming the nervous butterflies that are swarming in my stomach. “I’m a fucking selfish

bastard. If you think this is the best thing for you, then that's what will happen, but be prepared for a daily visit."

"I wouldn't want it any other way," I tell him, squeezing him tightly, my heart beating a fast rhythm inside my chest. "I love you, Prince."

"I love you so fucking much, Ember," he murmurs back, leaning down and placing his lips on mine. His kiss is full of longing and it makes my heart ache, doubt creeping in that I can do this alone.

He pulls away, leaving a small peck on my lips before turning me in his arms, and then Cas is there, his copper eyes shining, his brows furrowed. "We'll be here, waiting for you to return to us, Cinders," he tells me, his voice deep and rasping.

"Oh, Cas," I choke out, throwing myself in his warm embrace and breathing him in. "I'm scared."

"Hey," he breathes, his palm cradling my cheek and tilting it upwards until I'm once again staring into his beautiful eyes. "You are the bravest person I've ever met. You've got this, my love."

Then he tips his head down, his lips pressing against mine in a softly sweet kiss that strips me raw. I cling to him, trying to take the strength his kiss and embrace is offering, hoping it'll be enough for what is coming.

"I love you, Cas," I murmur when we part, his thumb stroking the tears from my cheek.

"I love you too," he replies, and then he's stepping away, Oct replacing him at my front and Kit at my back until I'm between them both and wrapped up in their powerful arms.

"We'll miss you, Little Sis," Oct says gruffly, tears making his blue eyes sparkle like a tropical sea. "But I know that you'll come back stronger, and then we can give them all hell."

I chuckle, then pause as a thought occurs to me. "What will you guys do?"

“We’ll be fine, Pretty Thing,” Kit murmurs against my ear, and a small shiver cascades across my skin. “We’ll wait and plot for when you’re back with us. Then we’ll see. Just focus on getting well and coming back to us, love.”

“I will,” I say, my voice trembling as it comes closer to the time of letting them go and stepping out alone.

Oct leans down to kiss me, his tongue delving into my mouth and gently caressing mine with such tender affection that my knees almost give way. Then Kit is turning my face to the side and kissing me from behind, his lips gentle.

It’s the hardest thing in the world to part from them, to step out of their comforting embrace and turn to face the door.

“Come on, Sugar,” Prince encourages, taking my hand in his and opening the door. The doctor and the two guys from Serene Haven are waiting just outside, and Prince stiffens beside me as we exit the room.

“If anything happens to her,” he states in a low, dangerous voice, not finishing his sentence, but the threat is clear in it.

“She’ll be under the best care, Mr Brown,” Dr North assures him with a nod. “And you can visit her daily, just call ahead and they’ll tell you when visiting hours are.” She looks at me, sympathy shining in her eyes. “I don’t think you’ll be there long, Ember. Just enough to rest up and heal.” She indicates I take her arm, but Prince growls.

“We’ll walk her out,” he snarls, and Cas takes my other hand, Oct and Kit behind me, presenting a united front.

“Of course,” Dr North agrees, holding out her arm to show that we follow her direction towards the lifts.

Taking a deep inhale, trying to calm my racing heart, I follow, my guys surrounding me and lending me the strength that I need to face this without them.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“FUCK YOU” BY SILENT CHILD

PRINCE

My fists clench as I watch the private ambulance drive away with my soulmate inside. It feels like my soul is rending in half, the pain of knowing that she needed something I couldn't give her almost bringing me to my knees. I can't help feeling that I failed her once again. I know that makes me all kinds of selfish because this is what's best for her, but I still can't stop the toxic worries swirling around my mind like mosquitoes, waiting to land and draw blood.

“Come on, Prince. Let's go back to the house and get some of her things to take once she's settled,” Cas urges softly, pulling out his phone and calling our driver. Funny how Odette didn't let him go, although, if she's had access to Ember's funds this whole time, I guess she didn't need to fire everyone. I guess she just didn't want their eyes on her, seeing what she put us and Ember through.

We wait in silence, the familiar black car pulling up next to the curb, and then we all pile in.

“Is Miss Ember not with you?” the driver—Davis—asks, and I take in a measured breath, trying to force the black claws of panic down. She'll be okay.

“She's going to spend some time at Serene Haven,” Cas informs him, and the man lets out a sigh.

“My cousin spent a few weeks there last year,” he tells us gently, catching my gaze in the mirror as he pulls away. “It’s a really nice place. Tranquil. Calm.” He gives me a soft smile, and I have to swallow around the lump in my throat at the kindness of this practical stranger.

“Thank you,” I rasp out as a warm hand interlaces their fingers with mine. I look to the side to see Oct, then I squeeze his hand back, my heart aching for everything that’s happened in the past week.

He rests his head on my shoulder, and I press a kiss to his soft hair, uncaring what Davis thinks as I just need the comfort that Oct is offering. We spend the rest of the journey in silence, and I’m not the only one who takes in a sharp breath as we approach the house.

It held such hope for all of us when we arrived, but that was dashed the night Odette sold us all to monsters. No, it was the moment she orchestrated the death of Robert. My skin flushes, my vision clouding for a moment as I think about all that she’s taken from my brothers and Ember. All that she’s taken from me.

For what? Because my dad left her with a small child? Plenty of people face similar situations and they don’t turn into black fucking widows, wreaking death and sorrow in their wake.

With heavy footsteps, we make our way upstairs, heading straight to Ember’s room to pack her a bag. She’ll want some familiar things around her to help keep her grounded. Maybe we should give her some of our shirts too, she enjoys wearing them and I’m sure it’ll help soothe her.

I’m just about to suggest this as we walk through Ember’s door, but I stop dead in my tracks when I spot Odette sitting on Ember’s bed, legs crossed and with a smug as fuck grin on her lying face.

My lips pull back, a snarl of rage hissing from them.

“Get. Out.” I can barely speak, my fists clenching and unclenching at my sides, my muscles twitching and aching to

hurt her.

“Oh, don’t be like that, Prince,” she coos, standing up and taking a step towards me. The sound of her voice is like nails on a chalkboard, and I have to close my eyes for a moment just to try to breathe past the red haze that wants to descend.

“We know about the Will,” Cas says from beside me, his own voice shaking, and I glance at him to see his eyes bright in his flushed skin. “And the murders. You’re done, the police know all about your fucked up parties and they are coming for you.”

There’s the barest of twitches around her eyes as she takes in his words, then she smoothes her hands down the front of her blouse.

“It’s not an issue, not now that your sister is locked away and I’m listed as her next of kin.” Her grin is full of triumph, and I snap, advancing on her. She backs away, her smile faltering for a beat and her throat bobbing as she swallows hard, but I keep going until we’re outside, her back pressed up against the balcony railing. My hand wraps around her throat, and my muscles shake with the need to tighten my grip and cut off her air supply, watching as the light drains from her devilish eyes, but she just fucking smiles wider. White-hot rage fills my very bones at the sight. “All her finances are under my control, so anything you’ve done can be stopped with enough money.”

The distant wailing of sirens sounds, and a feline grin tugs my lips upwards. “Not this time, *mother*.” I practically spit the word, and her smile falters. “It’s in the hands of the law now, all the evidence of your sins, the murders, the living off immoral earnings.” I lean in closer, watching her eyes widen, the whites showing as my words sink in. “The sexual exploitation of children.”

Her mouth opens, then closes, and my grin grows wider. “You are finished, and you will rot in jail for the rest of your miserable life, knowing exactly what you’ve lost.”

With a final sneer, I release her, turning my back on the bitch for the last time.

“Prince!” she exclaims, her hand grasping at my bicep, but my reflexes have me spinning around, knocking her off me.

Everything slows down, like time is moving at a snail’s pace. Her arms pinwheel, pure terror on her face as she tips over the balcony railing, a scream ripping from her throat. Then time speeds up as her heeled feet disappear from view, and I’m rushing over to the railing.

I rear back when I see what lies before us. She’s impaled through the chest on the pointed arrow of the Cupid statue that stands in the fountain, blood tinging the water red, her eyes open but unseeing.

“I always liked that statue,” Oct says from beside me after several moments of silence, and bastard that I am, a huff of laughter escapes my lips.

“Fuck,” I whisper just as several police cars pull to a stop outside the front of the house, their sirens blaring and blue lights flashing.

“I called them as soon as we saw her,” Kit tells me, and I tear my gaze away from the shitshow to look at him. “They knew of the charges and were looking for her.”

“Shit, this might take some explaining,” Cas rasps out, and I wince. What if they think we killed her? That I killed her? Did I?

I play through what happened, and my hands shake as I realise I knocked her away which caused her to trip. Nausea swirls in my stomach at the idea that I had a hand in my mother’s death, but then something in my chest loosens. She’ll never hurt any of us or Ember again. I’ve saved us all from ever having to deal with her scheming and manipulations for good.

“We should probably let them in,” I tell them in a gruff voice, straightening up and heading to the balcony doors.

“Hey, Prince,” Cas says softly, and I pause, my back still facing them all as a deep inhale makes my chest rise. “Thank you, brother.”

I close my eyes, letting the weight that has held me down for years fall away, leaving me light as a fucking feather.

“WE GO DOWN TOGETHER” BY DOVE CAMERON,
KHALID

EMBER

Serene Haven lives up to its name. It’s on the outskirts of London and is surrounded by rolling hills and wooded areas. The building itself is an old manor house, and I love all the old paintings that line the walls, the rooms spacious, each with their own bathrooms.

The communal spaces feel more like an upmarket hotel, but with an air of tranquillity that immediately puts you at ease, with soft, muted tones and lots of cushions and throw blankets scattered around.

I spend the first couple of hours settling in, meeting some of the other residents—they don’t like the term patients—and my therapists. I will take part in group therapy and one-on-one sessions. Plus, they have art therapy and lots of exercise programs.

I’m taken for a tour and they show me an indoor pool and sauna setup, a gym, and yoga studio. They believe physical exercise and meditation are as important for healing as talking through our problems.

I’m in the garden room several hours after my arrival, nestled on a large soft sofa with a blanket and a sketchpad when one of the staff members walks towards me, three guys following.

“Little Sis!” Oct yells, rushing past the orderly and scooping me up in his arms before pulling me in for an enormous hug. “Fuck, I missed you, beautiful.”

“Oct,” I breathe out, wrapping my arms around him, my sketchpad forgotten at my feet as I just breathe him in. All tension drains from my body, leaving me almost boneless as I lose myself in his arms.

“Hey, Pretty Thing,” Kit whispers against my ear, encasing me between them, and my entire body sags in relief.

“Hey,” I murmur back, letting go of Oct and turning in his arms to hug Kit to me.

“I’d forgotten how beautiful you were,” Kit tells me, pulling back to rake his eyes all over me.

“You saw me a few hours ago.” I laugh, spotting Cas and stepping away from the twins to give him a hug too. “Hello, Cas.”

“Fuck, Cinders,” he rasps out, pulling me so close that not a breath of air is between us. “How are you settling in?”

I loosen my grip on him to look into his beautiful copper eyes. There’s a tightness around them, and I frown as I realise Prince is missing.

“Where’s Prince?” I ask, my stomach knotting as Cas heaves a sigh.

“You best sit down for this, baby,” he tells me, keeping me in his arms as he sits on the sofa, pulling me into his lap. The twins settle on either side of us, both touching me.

“What’s happened?” My voice is quiet, straining over the sudden lump that has formed in my throat. How much more can we take?

Cas sighs once more and my body lifts with the movement, it’s so deep. “Odette is dead, Cinders.”

My whole body goes stiff, my eyes widening as I wriggle to look up at him.

“What?” It’s a hiss of air, a breath that colours the surrounding air in shades of grey.

“She...fell off the balcony,” Cas says softly, and he looks away for a split second, letting me know that there’s more to

the story.

“What happened?” I gasp out, my hands trembling. Oct takes one in his, rubbing over my cold knuckles, and it soothes some of the anxiety racing through me.

“Prince and Odette were arguing after she confessed to having you committed,” Cas informs me, and my wide eyes go even wider at that.

“She had me committed? To here?” My head is reeling, all the peace I’d found lost. I’d come to terms with being at Serene Haven was the best decision for me, but to find out it was forced upon me...that woman has tainted it.

“So she could control your money, Little Sis,” Oct grits out, his jaw tight. “And Prince confronted her about it. They were on the balcony, but he’d turned his back on her, and then she tried to grab him.”

Dread fills my veins with ice, and I shiver, even though the afternoon sun shines through the large windows.

“Then what happened?” My voice is barely above a whisper, but like watching a car crash, I can’t look away and need to know the rest.

“He broke her hold, and then she was falling,” Kit continues, and I twist to look over my shoulder at him. The skin around his eyes is tight, but he doesn’t look sad. None of them do. I guess after everything she did, she doesn’t deserve their grief. “She landed on the fountain.” He winces, and I don’t need to know the gory details to know that it probably wasn’t pretty.

“So where is Prince now?” I question, my stomach quivering. Sweat slicks my palms, even though I feel freezing.

“He’s still with the cops, answering questions.” Cas huffs out a breath. “We called John, and he’s with him and will represent him if it goes further, but he doesn’t think that’s likely, given our statements.”

Oh, my poor Prince. I can’t imagine what he’s feeling right now. She may have been an all-round bitch, but she was still

his mum, and to be so closely linked to her death, even if it was accidental... Fuck, this is a shitshow.

“So, what happens now?” I ask quietly, my shoulders rounding with the weight that seems to settle on them.

“Hey, Cinders, baby, look at me,” Cas urges softly, and his warm palm tilts my face until I’m staring into his copper eyes. “Nothing has to change if you don’t want it to. You can stay here for as long as you need. We’ll still be waiting for you to come back when you’re ready.”

My forehead creases, my chest loosening at his words. “Are you sure? It’s just...” I take an inhale, preparing myself to tell them the truth of how I feel being here. “It’s just that I feel calmer here, like it might actually be exactly the place I need to be.”

I nibble my lower lip, my stomach churning at the admission. I don’t want them to think that I don’t need them too. I just need this more right now.

“We understand, Little Sis,” Oct murmurs gently, bringing my legs across his lap and massaging them, sending delicious tingles along the aching muscles. “And you’ve actually made me think about seeing someone too, to talk through all the shit.”

“Really?” I ask, a small smile tugging my lips upwards. “That’s great, Oct.”

“Yeah,” Kit says from behind me, placing a kiss on my shoulder. “I think we could all do with a little help.”

I take another deep inhale before snuggling into Cas and releasing it, Oct massaging my calves and Kit wrapping me up from behind. There’s a twinge of pain in my chest, because I wish Prince were here too, and I can’t help the worry that leaves me a little nauseous that it won’t work out and he’ll be charged for Odette’s death. Her last act of control over his life.

“Tell us more about this place, Cinders,” Cas quietly demands, and I look up into his eyes to see that he knew my mind was worrying. Giving him a grateful smile, I tell them all that I’ve learned so far, and the way they ask questions and

seem genuinely happy for me makes a warmth blossom inside my chest, easing the tightness and the pain.

Maybe things might be okay after all.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“FACE IN THE CROWD” BY FREYA RIDINGS

EMBER

After a night of tossing and turning, with hands grasping me every time I closed my eyes, I’m feeling pretty shitty as I head down for breakfast.

“Ember?” a familiar feminine voice that I’ve not heard in years sounds as I enter the dining room, and when I swivel my head, I have to blink.

“Iris?” My brows furrow, my mind taking a hot minute to process the fact that my old friend is here, at Serene Haven.

She looks, well, pretty rough to be honest. Her long, wheat-blonde hair is tied in a messy bun, her slight frame engulfed in a massive hoodie with some kind of grim reaper printed on it. I frown more as I remember always admiring her quirky boho style, so the leggings and hoodie are not like what I used to know.

“Hey,” she says softly, getting up from her seat and coming towards me. The circles under her eyes are as dark as mine, and my chest tightens thinking about the reasons she might be here. I learned yesterday that Serene Haven specialises in helping victims of sexual violence, both male and female, although they are very careful about keeping us separate until we are ready to face the opposite sex.

“Hi,” I answer back, not sure what to say. I can’t exactly ask her how she is, there’s a reason we’re both here, and it’s

not because we're fine and dandy. "Long time, huh?"

She nods, swallowing. "It's been too long, really. I—I'm sorry we lost touch after school," she stutters out, and a pang runs through me. I met her when we moved to Chelsea, and we used to be super close, but her dad sent her to some fancy finishing school after we finished our exams while I went to college.

"Me too." I nibble my lip and then decide that having a friend here might just be exactly what I need. "Can I join you?" I indicate the table she was sitting at, and a smile tugs her lips upwards, reminding me of all the times we hung out and spoke about our wishes and dreams for the future.

"I'd really love that," she replies.

"Fab. I'll just get something to eat and come over."

I hurriedly grab some delicious-looking pastries and make my way to her. I wince when I sit down, my stitches pulling slightly, and she gives me a look that's so understanding it breaks my heart.

Swallowing, not quite ready to talk about the shitshow that my life became, I take a bite of my croissant. "So, how was finishing school?"

Her nose wrinkles and a small laugh falls from my lips. "It was...boring as fuck to be honest." We both chuckle. "They had us learning all about setting up dinner parties, being the most gracious hostess, and how to run a household." I grimace, remembering that her dad always wanted her to settle down with one of his associates' sons, but what she really wanted was to start her own sustainable fashion brand. "How was college?"

I have to take a sip of my orange juice; the pastry clinging to my suddenly dry throat. "It was good...but then Dad took me out."

Her brows shoot up and I sigh. Might as well get this part over with. "Dad remarried, and they thought it best that they homeschooled me with my stepbrothers." I look down and realise my fingers have pulled apart the rest of the croissant.

Brushing the flakes of pastry off my fingertips, I glance up to see the questions burning in her eyes and I huff a laugh. “Four older stepbrothers, to be exact.” The way her eyebrows shoot up is comical, but then I remember her going through a phase of being obsessed with books about romances between step-siblings. “Oh just ask, Iris.”

“Are they hot?” she blurts out, then covers her mouth with a gasp that has me laughing. It feels good, after so much heartache.

“The most gorgeous men I’ve ever met,” I tell her, biting my lower lip. You know what they say, in for a penny... “They, that is we, are together. They are everything to me, I’m not sure how I would have coped with Dad passing and... everything, if not for them.”

Her surprise is replaced with lowered brows, and her small hand reaches out and grips mine. “I’m sorry about your dad, Ember.” She squeezes my hand and tears prick at my eyes. “I know he was important to you.”

Iris knows the complicated relationship I had with my dad, that he wasn’t really there for me. We bonded over the fact that both of us were raised by single dads, that we didn’t have a mother around. Although her’s left when she was about four and her dad wasn’t distant like mine.

“Thanks,” I whisper before clearing my throat. “How’s your dad?” I know as soon as I ask that it was the wrong thing to say, her entire face shutting down as a haunted look enters her hazel eyes.

“He...” She trails off and swallows, then closes her eyes and just focuses on breathing for a few moments. “He left.”

It’s my turn for my eyebrows to shoot up, and the way her body trembles tells me that what has happened since is not a happy tale.

“You don’t need to talk about it, Iris,” I assure her, but she shakes her head, opening her eyes. Moisture clings to her lashes, and a lump forms in my throat.

“I want to, need to get it out, otherwise it’ll fester. That’s what Dr Michaels says anyway,” she rasps, taking another inhale, her fingers gripping mine tightly. “It’s complicated.” She laughs, but it’s painful sounding, not joyous. “He sold me to the Russian mafia in exchange for a business debt.”

Fuck.

“That’s...” I have no idea what to say. Well, I know exactly what to say, but I’m sure she already knows it.

“Fucked up? Yep,” she says, but then a small smile tugs her lips upwards. “But Nickolai was there, so it wasn’t all bad.”

My mind races, then I remember. “Nickolai, Sergi’s son?” I question, recalling her talking about him often being around when she was a child and blushing when she spoke of him after they became teens. “The good-looking one?”

She chuckles. “Yes, that one. He...helped me, then got me away, took me to Hunter and his Shadows.” Her cheeks flush at the mention of Hunter, and I wonder if she’s in a similar kind of relationship to me.

“You been messing with the Shadowman?” I tease, and we both giggle. We used to love watching Disney films together on Sunday afternoons, uncaring if that made us look uncool to the rest of the rich brats of our high school. “You knew them from before though, something to do with Hunter’s sister?”

“Willow, yes, I helped her get away after...” She doesn’t finish, looking away for a moment, and I remember her being upset at the time over what happened to Hunter’s sister. “Anyway, Nickolai took me there and they kept me safe.” Her eyes slam shut and her lips tremble. “Until the Russians found me again.”

My stomach sinks, feeling like it’s full of lead, and I reach over to take her other hand in mine, squeezing them both. Hot tears pool in my eyes, knowing deep in my gut that we’ve experienced some of the same pain at the hands of others.

“My stepbrothers couldn’t save me either,” I confess, and her eyes open, tears falling down her cheeks. “Couldn’t s-stop

what happened.”

“Oh, Ember.” Then she’s pulling me to her, and we’re crying and trembling in each other’s arms, letting out all the anguish at a world that would allow such terrible things to happen.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“WILD LOVE - ACOUSTIC” BY JAMES BAY

OCT

SEVERAL WEEKS LATER...

Fuck me, it's felt like a long time since I could properly wrap my arms around Ember without the feeling of eyes watching us. Not that it stopped us from being affectionate with her, but we couldn't worship her the way we'd wanted, the way she deserved.

Davis pulls the car to a stop outside the old building that is Serene Haven, and my heart pounds inside my chest. She's coming home, and boy, do we have a surprise for her.

Prince's leg bounces up and down as we wait for Davis to park, and I interlace our fingers. He turns to me, giving me a small smile that sets my soul alight. Although we've sought comfort in hugs and hand holding, we haven't touched each other sexually since Ember was committed. It just didn't feel right anymore, not without her in the middle.

Prince was released after hours of questioning, the police satisfied that what happened to Odette was an unfortunate accident and nothing more. We didn't tell them how relieved we all felt that she was dead, like a weight was lifted from our shoulders and we could finally breathe easy.

We've kept a close eye on Prince, she was his mother after all and he was instrumental in her death, but he seems at

peace, and we've all been seeing a therapist who has been helping us to get over all the shit during our time with Odette.

There's definitely a feeling of lightness that surrounds us now, and we laugh more than we ever have before.

I'm jolted from my thoughts as the car comes to a stop, and then Cas is opening the door and we're all rushing out, laughing as we push and shove each other out of the way.

"You boys are terrible," a laughing voice teases, and my head snaps up, my breath catching in my chest at the sight of Ember standing on the steps, her bags by her side, with Julia, ours and Ember's therapist, beside her.

"Little Sis!" I yell, rushing over and leaping up the stairs before drawing her into my arms and spinning her around. Her giggles are like music to my fucking ears, something in my very soul mending at having her finally coming home.

"Oct! You just saw me yesterday!" she exclaims, but there's joy in her tone as I lower her down and plant my lips on hers. She melts into me then, her arms wrapping around my neck as I pull her closer, losing myself in her softness.

She's fucking everything, so full of light that she shares freely, and I bask in her glow.

"Quit hogging her, bro," Kit grumbles from behind Ember, and she pulls away, her smile so wide that my tingling lips immediately copy her.

"Sharing is caring, bro," I tease back, and he tugs her from my arms with a growl, wasting no time in diving in for a kiss of his own. Fuck me, it's hot, full of possessive fire and a love so fierce that it would set the world alight.

He stops the kiss as abruptly as he started it, and Ember's shoulders heaves with her rapid breaths.

"Hey, Pretty Thing," he rasps out, his voice all husky, and I grin when a shiver cascades down her body.

"Hi," she breathes back, her face still tilted up to his.

"Stand aside and let me give our girl a proper welcome," Cas jokes, pulling her from Kit's grasp and tugging her into

his own.

He teases her lips, peppering them with kisses until she makes the most delicious mewling sound, then with a smirk, he closes the small distance and kisses her properly. My cock thickens in my jeans, knowing how fucking good his lips feel, how amazing hers feel too, and wishing I was in that sandwich.

Plenty of time for that later. We have some christening to do after all.

Cas ends their embrace with more teasing kisses, and by the time he finally pulls away, she's breathless, her cheeks flushed. "Ready to come home, Cinders?" he asks in a husky tone, and I know that he's probably sporting a semi of his own.

"Almost," she whispers back, stepping away from him and turning to face Prince. "Hello, Prince."

"Hello, Sugar," he replies, his face breaking into a sexy as fuck smile, which only grows as she goes to him, wrapping her arms around him and placing her lips against his.

After he was released from the cops, he came straight here, visiting her for hours, and when he returned home, he was like a new man. Like all the worry and burden had been lifted.

His hands come up to cup either side of her face, his mouth slanted over hers as he practically inhales her in, and she clings to him like he's the thing that's keeping her here. I don't care who tethers her to this world, because as long as she never leaves it, I'm happy.

"I'll be seeing you all for your regular fortnightly sessions, Oct," Julia tells me, coming up next to me and watching Ember and Prince with a smile. "She's ready, and with all of you around I've no doubt she'll have her hands full." She chuckles and I give her a wide-eyed, innocent look.

"I suppose we are quite a *handful*, Julia," I tease, and she scoffs, turning to face me before patting me on the cheek.

"Rogue."

She's been helping us deal with all the trauma and finding ways to manage our feelings over everything that happened as well as coping mechanisms. She's also completely supportive of our unconventional relationship.

I help Davis load Ember's belongings into the car, Prince finally releasing her so she can say goodbye to Julia, then we're all piling back in and driving away, our girl in between Kit and I as we won the game of rock, paper scissors when we were trying to decide who got to sit with her.

We're all sitting in companionable silence when Ember suddenly straightens up, peering around me to look out of the window.

"This isn't the way home," she states, her forehead wrinkled as she takes in the countryside that now surrounds us.

"It is now," Prince says from behind us, and she turns in her seat, her eyes narrowed.

"What do you mean by that?" There's a smile playing around her luscious lips, so I think our surprise will hopefully be a welcome one.

"Patience, Sugar," he replies with a devilish grin, and I can't help the smirk that tugs my lips upwards.

She huffs out a breath but turns back around and continues to stare out of the window, her eyes taking in the surrounding scenery.

Butterflies fill my stomach with excited flutters the closer we get, and soon we're pulling into the short drive, the old farmhouse lying before us. Her mouth parts as she takes in the stone and flint that make up the front wall, the many large-paned windows, and the lavender bushes that sit underneath the ground-floor windows.

"Where are we?" she breathes out as we pull to a stop, and no one answers as the door is opened and I step out, holding out my hand for her.

"This, Little Sis," I say, drawing her in front of me and wrapping her up in my arms from behind. "Is our new home."

“This is ours?” Her voice is soft, her gaze looking at the building with wide-eyed wonder.

“Eight bedrooms, built in the seventeenth century, and full of cozy fireplaces, beams, and lots of nooks and crannies,” I tell her, placing a kiss on her neck.

“Plus there’s quite a bit of land, a swimming pool and gym, and an art studio out back,” Kit adds from beside us, taking her hand in his and pressing a kiss to the back of it.

“It’s a place just for us, Cinders, and we thought you seemed to really love the peace of Serene Haven, so this is our very own slice of heaven.” Cas’s tone is gentle as he watches her face from next to Kit, Prince coming up on our other side.

“What do you think?” Prince asks, and we wait, no one daring to breathe.

“I love it,” she says, glancing around. Then her brows lower. “But, how did we get it? How could we afford it?”

Prince’s intake of breath is audible, and a fissure of worry shoots through me too.

“Well, when Odette died, the power of attorney she had over you and your finances transferred to her next of kin.” He pauses, and I hold her as he comes to stand in front of us, Kit releasing her hand so he can take them both in his. “I thought that going back there would be hard for you, and we all needed a fresh start, so I used some of your inheritance to buy this place. We still have the other if you’d rather go back there. I just thought...”

I’ve not seen Prince so unsure before, and we all agreed that this was for the best, to start anew and not drag her back to the place of all our nightmares. I wish I could see her face, see her reaction to the fact we kind of just railroaded her and took her control, even if it was done with the best of intentions. *Shit.*

“Can I see the inside?” she asks, and I watch as Prince’s face lights up with a smile, his shoulders relaxing as my heart gives a hard thud inside my chest.

“Abso-fucking-lutely!” I cry out, then stepping to the side, I lift her into my arms bridal style. She squeaks, giggling as she wraps her arms around my neck.

“Oct!” she admonishes with a laugh, but I just chuckle as Prince strides forward, unlocking the large oak door and opening it wide for us.

“It’s traditional to carry you over the threshold,” I tell her, twisting so we can get through the door. Carefully, I set her down and take her hand. “Let’s show you our new home.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“RIGHT HERE” BY CHASE ATLANTIC

EMBER

Every room is painted yellow, from the deepest of golds to the softest of butters, and I can already feel the joy filling up our house, our new home.

I was a little nervous about going back to the mansion, not sure I would ever be able to feel comfortable there again after that night, and my chest tightens knowing that the guys knew this without me even having to say a word. That they knew what I needed and took care of it, even if the worry on Prince’s face confirmed they weren’t sure if I’d agree.

Everything important is here, all our pictures and trinkets, and it’s full of colourful, soft furnishings and rugs which bring tears to my eyes. Mum would have loved this place. Heat radiates through my entire body, my hands tingling as they show me around.

The rooms are spacious, the ceilings low and full of wooden beams throughout the whole place, making it feel homely and safe, like a welcoming cave, a place of refuge. The large, modern art studio in the garden is incredible—apparently, the last owners were artists and it was already here. It’s one reason the guys knew it would be perfect for us, so they told me.

There are enough bedrooms for each of us to have our own space, and a sigh of relief escapes me to see the enormous bed

in my room, big enough for us all. I've had enough nights on my own and I don't plan to sleep alone ever again.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Prince asks from behind, wrapping his arms around me as I look around my room. He nestles his head in the crook of my neck, my arms coming up to wrap over his as he breathes me in.

"I love it here, Prince," I say, my heart feeling so full it might burst. "It's just missing one thing."

I smirk as he stiffens behind me, and I use the opportunity to spin in his arms.

"What's it need, Sugar?" he asks, looking around with such a scowl on his handsome face that I have to bite my lip to hold in my laughter.

"Christening," I reply, then without giving him a chance to say another word, I go up on tiptoes, close the gap between us, and place my lips on his.

He takes a second, his lips unmoving until a deep groan leaves his chest, and then he's pulling me closer, his hands everywhere as he touches me all over. Kissing Prince is like coming home and finding a roaring fire in the fireplace, a cup of spiced hot chocolate waiting for you.

He pulls away, a small whimper leaving my throat as he stares deeply into my eyes. "Are you sure?"

I almost laugh out loud remembering what Iris had said to me before I left.

"Don't let those cunts win, Ember. You go home and fuck the ever-loving brains out of your stepbrothers like the dirty bitch you are."

Then she'd slapped my arse and sent me on my way. Crazy bitch.

"I'm sure, Prince. They don't get to win," I whisper, closing the distance between our lips again and sliding my hands down his abs, tugging the hem of his T-shirt up.

We break apart just to take it off, then his lips are back on mine and he's pulling my tank top over my head, a deep

masculine moan leaving him at my lack of a bra. I'd decided pretty quickly that as this was my new home, I didn't need it while I was inside, so I took it off almost as soon as we got through the door.

"You've been teasing me for fucking hours, baby, knowing that only thin cotton stood between my mouth and these gorgeous tits," he purrs, dipping low and taking one of my nipples in his warm mouth.

A moan falls from my lips at the contact, tingles racing along my nerve endings as he plays with it using his very skilled tongue. Movement by the door has my hooded gaze snapping up to see Cas, and then the twins walk through, eyes taking in the scene and pausing.

"Looks like you got the welcome party started without us," Oct teases, sauntering over and running a hand down Prince's back. "Do share, brother."

Prince groans, pulling up, his cheeks flushed and his hair looking all kinds of tousled and gorgeous. Oct immediately dips his head down, taking the nipple Prince had just been sucking into his mouth while Prince goes to work on the other.

A sharp breath leaves me at their combined attention, and I watch with bated breath as Cas comes over to us, also touching Prince as he passes. I love the casual affection they have for each other.

"You're so fucking beautiful, Cinders," he purrs, leaving his hand on Prince's shoulder but using his other to cup my cheek. He tugs my face towards his, his lips slamming on mine, his tongue demanding immediate entry.

I sink into the embrace, knowing that Cas will take care of me no matter what. He's like the first caress of morning sunlight and the calming breeze on a scorching summer day. My hands tighten in Prince and Oct's hair, a small whimper leaving me as hands brush down my sides from behind. Dark memories try to assault me, but I take a deep inhale, counting to five as they taught us in Serene Haven.

They all pause, Cas releasing my lips to look deeply into my eyes, his copper ones bright with concern. My heart is thundering inside my chest as I swallow and let the tingling fear wash over me, not denying its presence but not letting it take over either. Another tip from the therapists, to not let your fears rule you, to acknowledge the feelings you have but not to act upon them. *It's your guys, Ember, not those men.*

"It's just me, Pretty Thing," Kit whispers, his hands tracing over my stomach before teasing the waistband of my shorts. "Let me take care of you."

"D—don't stop, please," I murmur back, taking a deep inhale and letting their combined scents engulf me, calming my racing heart. "I need you to help me move on."

"Anytime it's too much, you tell us, baby, and we stop, okay?" Kit orders in a low voice. "It's a lot all in one go, darling."

"Okay, I promise." My breathing hitches when Prince and Oct resume teasing my nipples with their hot tongues, Kit's hand popping open the button of my cotton shorts and undoing the zipper. I hold Cas's gaze as my shorts fall down my legs, my knickers following until I'm standing naked before them.

"You take my breath away, Cinders. Every fucking time," he rasps out, his eyes going molten as he stares at me. A flush rises on my cheeks, colouring my chest at his appraisal, then a heady moan slips from between my lips as Kit's fingers slide between my folds, discovering how wet I already am.

"So wet for your brothers," he groans, and the way they all refer to our semi-taboo connection, even if our parents are no longer here, always gets me hot and bothered.

Bliss flows through me like a wave when his fingers effortlessly slip inside me, my nails digging into Prince's and Oct's scalps at just how fucking good it all feels.

"So fucking ready for us, Pretty Thing," Kit purrs behind me, picking up his speed, his palm hitting my clit every time his thick digits enter me. "You're going to come all over my

fingers. I want you dripping before we fill you up with mine and Oct's fat cocks."

"Fuck, Kit!" I gasp, his dirty words my undoing, and I shatter in a million pieces, doing just as he demanded and coming all over his hand. Waves of ecstasy drown me, and it's all I can do to keep breathing as I freefall into a blissful abyss, my eyes closing with the sheer pleasure that I am currently made from.

"Such a good girl for your brothers," Oct praises, and I open my eyes, my body slumped in Kit's arms as he leisurely pumps his fingers in and out. I moan long and low when he withdraws them and then gasp when Cas grabs his hand and starts sucking my release from them.

"So fucking delicious, just like I remember," he murmurs once he releases Kit's hand, then he slants his lips over mine and lets me taste myself on his tongue.

My back goes cold as Kit steps back and I hear the rustle of clothes, but all my attention is on the man in front of me, devouring me with his lips and tongue. Slowly, the kiss ends, my body tingling all over, my nipples hardened nubs and my pussy pulsing.

"Go get on the bed with the twins while I suck Prince's cock and he tries not to come watching you," Cas commands gruffly, a devious smile tugging his damp lips upwards. Fuck, I'd forgotten how the idea of them together is such a turn-on, my thighs clenching and my knees weak as I imagine it.

"Come ride me while Kit rides you, Little Sis," Oct orders from the bed, amusement lacing his tone, and I twist to find he's lying there naked, his hard cock glistening as he pumps his fist up and down over it.

"As you wish, brother," I tease, and the moan that leaves his lips is positively sinful.

Swaying my hips, I saunter over to the bed, the heat of all their gazes on me. It lights me up, makes me feel strong and desired, and a slow smile builds on my lips as I climb onto the bed and crawl over to Oct.

“Fuck, Little Sis,” Oct rasps, a drop of pre-cum beading at his tip as he watches me. My tongue darts out as I bend over him, licking up the droplet to a chorus of deep groans.

Deciding to indulge myself a little, I sink my mouth lower onto his cock, using my tongue to massage his length as I suck. His hand comes to rest on the back of my head, his fingers tangling in my hair and lightly gripping it as I bob up and down on his dick.

I gasp around his hardness as lips kiss my pussy, a tongue tracing the seam before diving in and teasing my inner walls. A shiver cascades over me at the pleasure that rolls through me, Oct’s grip on my hair tightening as I suck harder, using my teeth to scrape along the sides of his shaft.

“Shhhhit,” he gasps, thrusting his hips upwards and sinking deeper. “I won’t last much longer if you keep doing that, Little Sis.”

I smile as I bob back up, kissing and licking his tip while whoever is behind me keeps worshipping my cunt like I’m their favourite meal. The familiar tingle of an orgasm builds, I’m so worked up from not having them for the past few weeks that it’s embarrassing how quickly they’re pulling orgasms from me.

The wave crests with a gasping cry from my lips, my eyes closing as my release squirts out of me, the sound of loud slurping as the person behind me keeps going, prolonging the exquisite agony that is rendering me immobile.

Then he finally relents, and I blink open bleary eyes to glance over my shoulder, seeing Kit’s lips and chin glistening, a devilish smirk plastered on his face.

“That’s two I’ve given her, you boys need to catch up,” he drawls, and a breathy giggle escapes from my lips even as my eyes try to widen.

“It’s not a fucking competition,” I murmur, hearing them all chuckle.

“Oh, it really is, Little Sis. Kit’s just thrown down the gauntlet,” Oct comments, his cheeks flushed and his jaw set as

he gives Kit a nod. “It’s on.”

Before I can argue more—*how the fuck am I going to survive if they each give me two orgasms?!*—Oct lets go of my hair and grabs me under my arms, yanking me up and burying his cock deep inside me.

“Oct!” I gasp, moving my hips and grinding down on him as the burn of the stretch subsides into a heady pleasure.

“That’s it, beautiful. Take what you want from me,” he commands, swirling his finger around my clit, which is engorged and so fucking sensitive, making me twitch and writhe every time he passes over it.

“Fuck, Oct...” I moan, pumping my hips harder, chasing another orgasm that is building, leaving me tingling all over and wound up tight like a coiled spring.

“Come on, baby, come for your brother, soak me with that pussy,” he purrs, his other hand reaching out and grabbing my breast before squeezing and pulling my nipple.

My body seizes, my climax stealing my ability to breathe, let alone make any kind of sound as I explode. My nails dig into his chest, clinging on for dear fucking life as I’m drowned in pleasure, no hint of fear over what happened in that attic all those weeks ago in sight.

“Such a good, beautiful girl,” Kit praises from behind me as I slump over, my face pressed against Oct’s neck as my chest heaves and I try to relearn what breathing feels like.

A keening moan leaves my chest as Kit pushes inside me, his slicked-up dick sliding against Oct’s and filling me so full I’m not sure I’ll be able to take them.

“Shhh, Little Sis. That’s it, let him in, baby,” Oct soothes, rubbing one hand up and down my back, the other still toying with my clit as his twin thrusts all the way in.

“Fuck, I forgot how perfect your pussy is, Pretty Thing,” Kit groans, holding still and letting my sweat-soaked body adjust to his intrusion.

“You’re doing so well, Little Sis,” Oct croons, his words and soft touches relaxing my body more as Kit moves. “Fuck, bro, those piercings.”

A gush of wetness floods between my thighs, the idea of Oct feeling his own brother’s dick piercings doing things to me that really should be illegal.

“I think our sister likes the fact you can feel me, Oct.” Kit chuckles, his hands grasping my hips as he moves faster, sinking deeper inside me.

My breath shudders out of my chest, my nails digging into Oct’s skin as they fuck me together, never leaving me empty, and sweat slicks down my spine as another orgasm builds under my skin.

“She’s close, brother,” Kit grits out, sounding like he, too, is almost there. “Make her come again so we can fill her up.”

I moan deep and low as Oct pinches my clit, his other hand wrapping around my throat, squeezing lightly. A sudden spike of terror zaps through me, but it only brings my climax crashing over me with such force that I wordlessly scream, my entire body going rigid between the boys.

“Fuck, Ember!” Oct yells, sinking deep inside me and coming with an animalistic roar.

I’m still pulsing, still fucking seeing stars as Kit stiffens behind me, burying his cock so deep that a twinge of pain flares from my core as he fills me up, just as he promised.

I flop back down onto Oct, sweaty and completely spent, both twins still inside my pussy as we pant and come down from our highs.

“Fuck, Cas,” a deep groan sounds next to us, and opening my eyes, I gasp when I see Prince lying back, Cas’s head bobbing up and down in his lap. Prince’s molten emerald eyes land on mine, and he gives me the sexiest smirk known to man. “Thank fuck they’re done, Sugar. I wasn’t gonna hold out much longer.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“CONTAMINATED” BY BANKS

CAS

I lift my head from Prince’s dick to look over at Ember, and fuck if the sight of her all sweaty and sated doesn’t make my cock weep, desperate to be inside her, to feel her heat wrapped around me again.

Her lips part when Kit pulls out, the wet sound of him leaving letting me know that she’s already come several times. Plus, she’s filled up with the twin’s releases so is already lubed up nicely for us.

“I’m taking that last orgasm as my point,” Oct claims, and I chuckle, having overheard their teasing remarks earlier. The twins are beyond competitive. He pulls Ember closer, and my heart swells to see her nuzzling into his body, her lips placing a lazy kiss on his sweat-soaked skin. She really doesn’t hold what we did, what Odette forced us to do, against us, and the relief I feel at that realization has the tension releasing from my limbs.

“Come here, Sugar,” Prince commands, and I roll my eyes at him. He just can’t help bossing everyone around, not that any of us complain much. Prince’s domination is hot as hell.

I watch as Oct helps her off him, and then she’s crawling across the massive bed to us, her tits swinging and eyes heavy-lidded. Jesus fucking Christ she’s exquisite, and I’m reaching

for her before she's reached us, pulling her into a kiss that sears my very soul.

She clings to me, her body trembling slightly, which I'm sure is because of the twins' care. Her tongue tangles with mine, and she moans, no doubt tasting Prince, her tongue licking inside my mouth with more urgency.

I pull away, both of us breathless and her cheeks flushed.

"You doing okay, Cinders?" I ask, my eyes tracing over her, then boring into her bright blue eyes, trying to see for myself that she's not reliving her nightmares.

"I'm more than okay, Cas," she whispers back, her fingers trailing down my cheek. "I missed you so much."

"Fuck, I missed you too, baby," I choke out, pulling her back to me to feel her lips against mine once more. I can't get enough, and I will never tire of having her in my arms, her naked body hot and waiting for me. For us.

She gasps into my lips, and I crack my eyes open to find Prince kneeling behind her, his focus on her ass as his hips slowly pump, his hands gripping her hips, fingers indenting the soft skin there.

"Does he feel good in that tight little ass of yours?" I ask against her lips, her body shivering and undulating with his thrusts.

"So fucking good," she groans in a deep, husky voice that will play in my dreams for years to come. Her fingers dig into my forearms, her back arching as she gives him better access, and I dip my head back down, needing her lips again as one of my hands skates down her body, my fingers sliding between her slick folds and finding her clit.

Swirling my finger around the hardened nub, she writhes and moans, and I swallow every one as Prince and I work her into a frenzy.

"Fuck, she's almost there, Cas," Prince growls out, the sound of him fucking into her tight hole filling the room. "Come for us, beautiful."

I pull my hand back, then give her clit a sharp slap that has her screaming, her release squirting out of her, covering my hand and making my dick weep to be inside her. Prince pauses, and I look over her shoulder, giving him a nod.

“Lie back,” I tell him, and he does, buried deep inside her as he manoeuvres them on the bed so her back is to his front, his dick still in her ass. “Fuck, that’s a beautiful sight.” I admire the view, then get into position, lining my hard dick with the opening of her pussy.

With no warning, I surge forward, a deep groan vibrating my chest as her still pulsing cunt tries its best to fucking strangle me.

“Cas!” she gasps, her nails clawing down my arms as I waste no time in fucking her raw, needing to go deeper, to imprint myself into her very fucking soul.

“Take it all, Cinders. Take my cock in that pretty cunt of yours,” I command, sweat beading on my brows when Prince moves. I can feel him inside her, his dick rubbing up against mine and it’s almost enough to have me blowing my load right fucking then.

“Goddamn,” Prince mutters, his eyes locking with mine as she moans and whimpers. “You’re so fucking perfect.”

I don’t know if he’s talking to her or me, but it has the effect of pouring gasoline onto a fire and I turn fucking feral, snarling and pounding into her so hard the whole bed shakes with the force.

She screams, her pussy clamping down just as the brush of fingers at the base of my cock sends me skyrocketing. I bury myself into her heat, my eyes closing as I explode, my release pouring inside her and filling her up alongside the twins’. My vision blurs and my pulse rings in my ears as a wave of euphoria washes over me.

Prince stiffens underneath her, his deep groan telling me he, too, just found nirvana, and I open my eyes to see his face creased in beautiful agony as he comes.

We remain locked together for several moments, our chests heaving and sweat dripping off our bodies.

“You really are so fucking perfect, Cinders,” I whisper against her ear, placing a kiss just below it and then rolling off her, shuddering when I slip free of her slick channel.

“I love you, all of you,” she answers sleepily back, taking in a sharp breath when Prince pulls out and shuffles her off him to the side, only to wrap her in his arms from behind.

“And we love you, Ember,” Prince returns, placing a kiss on her cheek just as I hear the sounds of the shower from the en-suite.

“You belong to us, Cinders, and we belong to you, body, mind, and soul,” I say quietly, staring into her sleepy eyes. “And we will never let you go. You will never be alone again.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“IN HELL I’LL BE IN GOOD COMPANY” BY THE DEAD SOUTH

EMBER

We spend the next couple of weeks basking in each other, spending time in our love nest, as Oct calls it, and talking about what we want to do in the future. The guys have all enrolled in online courses to bring them up to speed, and I love that they are each able to follow their own dreams and make their own decisions for what they want their future to look like.

I’ve contacted Mimi, and she’s going to resume my lessons and help me create a portfolio so I can get into Goldsmith’s and pursue my dream to study art.

Oct, Kit, Cas, and I are lounging on the comfy outside sofas on the patio, the weather having been warm all week now that we’re into summer, listening to the sounds of nature around us.

My heartbeat instantly picks up when I see Prince striding towards us from the house, his jaw tight and his brows drawn, and I sit up straighter, away from Cas’s side that I was snuggled into.

“What’s happened?” I ask, my voice soft and rasping, worry making the beautiful sunset pale.

“Nothing, yet, Sugar,” he assures me, coming to sit on the low table in front of me. Then he takes my hands in his, his

grip warm and comforting. “But there is something we need to discuss.”

“O—okay.” I swallow past the lump in my throat, my hands trembling in his as I search his stunning green eyes. I watch as he takes a deep inhale, closing his eyes briefly, then opening them to fix his stare on me.

“We need to decide what we’re going to do about the men that hurt you.” His tone is firm with the barest hint of anger in it as he watches me, drinking in how I flinch slightly. “I know that I’m not alone in saying that they need to be punished, that I can’t let them walk away from this.” The others murmur their agreement, but I don’t look away from the man in front of me, a part of my soul that I never knew I was missing. “But the question is, do you still want to be involved too?”

“Prince,” Cas grits out, his hand coming to rest on my thigh.

“No, Cas. She has the right to dole out justice for what they did to her. More so than us,” Prince answers, his gaze never leaving mine. Warmth suffuses my body at his words, at the fact that he didn’t want me anywhere near the revenge that I desperately wanted to seek before, yet now he knows I need it too. I need closure to take back the control that was stolen from me.

My chest feels tight, and I’m not sure if it’s because of what he’s suggesting, or the fact that he’s offering me a chance to get revenge. A chance to make those bastards pay for what they did to me, how they hurt me and almost made me give up.

Do I have what it takes to hurt them back? Am I that kind of person? Or would those nightmares haunt me as much as the others still do?

Prince patiently waits while I think, never pushing me one way or another as I weigh up all the options and end up coming to the only conclusion.

“I want to take the power back, to make them feel as helpless as they made me,” I tell him, my voice solid and sure even if my body trembles.

“Then that’s exactly what will happen, Sugar,” he replies, squeezing my chilled hands in his. Then he leans forward, ghosting his lips over mine, his breath smelling of whiskey and all things Prince. “And we will help you every step of the way.”

The following week goes by in a rush of anticipation, but somehow it also seems to drag until I’m going out of my mind with the need to just do something. We went with our previous plan of inviting them to another supposed party at the old house, Oct using his tech genius to make it seem like another, more private party was being hosted.

The idea of burning that place to the ground with those men inside fills me with all the warm and fuzzies, which I’m sure should be worrying, but I can’t find it in me to care what is socially acceptable given that these men, apparently pillars of society, have never had to face their multitude of crimes.

Oct used his hacking skills to look into every one of them and the reading was stomach-churning.

First up we have Lord Alaric Blackthorn, a charming and influential aristocrat who hosts lavish parties in his grand estate. On the surface, his parties are all just fun for the rich and famous of the world, however, there is a darkness that rarely gets seen. It’s not just the copious amounts of drugs and alcohol that are on offer, guests can indulge in all of their darkest fantasies, and consent is not something that is required. Behind closed doors, Lord Blackthorn is also involved in dark occult practices, including human sacrifice, and trades in forbidden and stolen artefacts. His never-ending pursuit of power and pleasure comes at a high cost, as he’s willing to sacrifice anyone who stands in his way.

Then there’s Benedict Caldwell, a revered banker and philanthropist. Caldwell is the face of many charitable foundations, however, his wealth has been amassed through deceitful schemes, extortion, and trafficking. Beneath his

gentlemanly demeanour lies a man who sees people as mere commodities, using them for his pleasure and then discarding them. He uses the charities to find his victims, preying on the most vulnerable of society and often helping source entertainment for Lord Blackthorn's parties.

Next up is Judge William Sterling. Respected in legal circles and feared by criminals. Judge Sterling is known for his harsh verdicts and unwavering attention to justice being served, but by night, he runs an underground network of vice dens, indulging in his and his friend's darkest desires. He has no morals, often using his connections in the criminal underworld to buy his victims.

Finally, we have Dr Benjamin Vale, a celebrated surgeon and academician. Dr Vale is hailed for his revolutionary medical research, but unknown to many, he conducts forbidden experiments on unwilling subjects in his private lab, and we can assume as he's friends with the other three, his tastes run just as dark and depraved.

How Odette found such monsters is beyond me, but she chose well, and it's no wonder they took to their role as my abusers with gusto. The one thing I'm certain of after we discovered all of their secrets is that these monsters deserve to die, and there is no doubt in my mind that my part in their deaths is doing society a favour.

I'm getting dressed on the night of what I'm calling the reckoning when Prince enters my room. Like me, he's head to toe in black, though that's not unusual attire for him. He looks devastating, like a dark angel seeking vengeance, and I pause in zipping my black leather boots just to admire him.

"How are you doing, Sugar?" he asks, stopping in front of me as I sit on the bed before going to his knees and taking over zipping my boot up.

I take a shaky inhale, not entirely sure what to say. "On the one hand, I'm terrified, shitting myself about what's to happen tonight," I confess, giving him my other foot when he demands it.

“And on the other hand?” he asks softly, zipping up the boot, then resting his fingers on my calf as he looks up at me.

“Excited?” I whisper, my cheeks flushing with the confession. “Which is all kinds of fucked up.”

He squeezes my leg, then still kneeling, he shuffles between my thighs, taking my face in his hands.

“It’s not fucked up, my love,” he tells me, his thumb stroking my cheek. “It’s perfectly normal to be excited about hurting those who hurt you. About finally standing up to them and showing them they were wrong.”

“Wrong?” My brows dip as the word sits between us, and I watch as his lips quirk up in a half smile.

“They were wrong that you were a victim and not the strongest woman they’ve ever met.” He places a light kiss against my lips before pulling back again to look at me. “Wrong that the only way they would ever get a scrap of attention from you was to take it, because you are a motherfucking queen and they are not fit to lick the ground that you walk on. Wrong that you were ever alone, that they would never have to face the wrath of not only the men who love you but wrong that you were incapable of making them pay.”

Tears fill my eyes, trailing down my cheeks in hot rivulets as he speaks, and he brushes each one aside.

“Wrong that they would ever see a sunrise that we didn’t allow them to, that you didn’t allow them to, Ember. Now let’s show them the error of their ways.” He leans in and fuses his lips to mine, kissing me with such passion that I can feel it scorching across all my nerve endings, lending me a fire that I’ll need to get through tonight.

All too soon he pulls away, giving me a devilish smile that leaves my core clenching. Standing up, he holds a hand out to me and I take it, sliding my palm into his warm one and letting him help me up.

Tonight I will get my revenge, and not just for me but for all the other countless victims that didn’t have the support of

four beautiful, broken men at their backs. Tonight we will serve justice and then bask in its fiery glow.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“BLOOD // WATER” BY GRANDSON

EMBER

While I was at Serene Haven Mental Health Centre, the guys all took a week-long crash course in driving and passed their tests, so we take a black Land Rover Discovery they bought and head to the old house. Kit and Oct met with Hunter, Roman, and Rowan, the leaders of The Shadowmen and apparently Iris’s boyfriends. Called it. I didn’t realise that they’d met, but apparently they hit it off when they were visiting me and the Shadows were visiting Iris.

The Shadowmen have some experience in this sort of thing, according to Prince, and as they’d offered to help make my tormentors pay, we brought them in as we’re complete novices. Just thinking this has a nervous chuckle trying to escape my lips. *Who casually thinks about murder like this?*

Hunter assured us that taking these monsters off the face of the earth also ensured that no one who came under the protection of the gang would be at risk in the future. The ones they protected were often vulnerable people who all too easily could succumb to the lure of money or who wouldn’t be much missed if they disappeared.

The night sky is full of stars as we head to the city, the twinkling lights getting less as we draw nearer to the Big Smoke, aka London. Light pollution prevents all but the

strongest being seen, and I snuggle into Prince in the back of the car the closer we get to where I used to live.

My heartbeat picks up as we turn into the driveway, the gates closing behind us as we make our way in the dark, the only light the beam of our headlights. No lights can be seen inside once we pull up, all the curtains are drawn shut, though I see several cars parked, only one of which is the other black Land Rover that belongs to us, Kit and Oct having gone ahead.

“The Shadowmen will take care of any other cars, Cinders,” Cas assures me, not for the first time as he takes in my puckered brows as I stare at the vehicles. “They have connections and a clean-up crew.”

“I know,” I say before purposefully taking a deep inhale and a slow exhale to calm my racing heart as I sit here, Prince quiet next to me. It doesn’t help much because I’m too keyed up to be calm.

“We have all the bases covered, Sugar. This will not come back on us.” Prince gives me a squeeze, placing a light kiss on my head before letting me go, opening the door and stepping out. The warm, summer night air filters into the air con-filled space, and I breathe in again, my chest feeling tight at the familiar scent of roses from the garden.

Time to pull your big girl panties up, Ember.

I take Prince’s offered hand, letting him help to pull me from the vehicle. The gravel crunches beneath my boots, sweat instantly pooling at the base of my spine as I look up at the house, the place of my nightmare. Though maybe after tonight, the place of salvation? Or more nightmares, the jury is out on that one.

“Let’s go, Cinders,” Cas says from my other side, taking my free hand in his, and Prince keeps ahold of my other as we make our way into the quiet property.

A shudder runs through me as we cross the threshold, a shaking exhale leaving my chest as we make our way deeper into the house, towards the kitchen at the back. My eyes

widen, a gasp lodging in my throat when the distinct sound of flesh hitting flesh reaches us.

“Rapist piece of shit!” Oct yells, and we rush through the door to find him standing over one of four men, all tied to chairs, all bleeding. Oct’s hands are clenched, his knuckles split and his whole body racked with tremors. I watch, frozen to the spot as he draws his fist back and punches the man in the face so hard that his chair topples backwards and he falls to the ground, moaning as his head smacks against the tiles.

“You got the party started without us,” Prince drawls, and there’s an air of violence in his tone, a darkness that I’m not sure I’ve heard before. I feel numb, taking it all in as if it’s some kind of warped dream.

“Apologies, brother,” Kit answers back, stepping away from one of the other men, who slumps and looks to be bleeding from multiple slashes across his naked torso. I swallow bile when I realise that all the men tied down are naked, my gaze flitting over them but not pausing for too long before moving away. “Are you doing okay, Pretty Thing?”

Blinking, I realise with a start that Kit is now in front of me, reaching out with bloody palms to cup my face. I take a sharp breath when his hands make contact, the skin slick with the blood of my tormentors. He pauses, looking deep into my eyes, concern and worry clear by the tightness of his jaw and his own lowered brows. He goes to pull away, but I release Cas and Prince’s hands, placing mine above Kit’s, holding them to my cheeks.

“I’m better now seeing you and Oct,” I whisper, unable to make my voice any louder. I lick my lips, trying to will my racing heart to slow down. The blasted organ won’t listen though, pumping a mile a minute, but I just focus on Kit, on the way he holds me and blocks my view of the men who hurt me so badly.

“I love you, Ember,” he murmurs, dipping his head and giving me a sweet kiss. I can feel the tension in him, his muscles coiled and ready to keep doling out punishment on my behalf.

“I love you, Kit,” I reply when he pulls away, finally letting his hands drop. His eyes dart over my cheeks, and I flush when I see them getting darker with heat.

“You look good covered in our enemies’ blood, Little Sis,” Oct rasps, barging Kit out of the way to grab me by my throat and pull me to his lips. I hear the others curse, but I don’t care because I’m drowning in Oct, clinging to him as he devastates me with his lips and tongue. He embraces the chaos that’s running through his veins, the violence clearly turning him on as he presses his hardness against my stomach.

“Try to wait before you fuck her, Oct,” a new voice teases in a deep baritone, and I pull back sharply to look at the stranger. He’s stacked, built like a brick shithouse, muscles on muscles that his vest does nothing to hide. Tattoos cover one arm, peeking out of his neckline. His dark blond hair is cut short to his head, a little longer on the top, and his jaw is reminiscent of a Disney prince.

The dark look in his green eyes is more Grimm fairy tales than Disney though, and he seems to be older than the rest of us by a few years. “Nice to finally meet you, Ember. Iris talks highly of you. I’m Hunter.”

His voice is deep, so deep it makes me think of an abyss that you could fall down in and never return.

“H–hello, Hunter,” I stammer, Oct moving to the side so I can see the two others in the room. They must be the twins, identical with their dirty blond hair tied in man buns to their sparkling brown eyes and stubbled chins.

“That’s Roman and Rowan,” Hunter introduces, but in all honesty, they look the fucking same, so I’ve no idea which is which.

“Thanks for being a friend to Iris,” the one on the left says, his lips quirking up in a cheeky grin that has my lips twitching. “And for giving her some new ideas to try in the bedroom.”

“I’ll be sure to text her later with a couple more,” I sass, which has all seven men looking at me. Hunter and the twins with wide eyes and my guys with knowing smirks.

“Now we know your names, you little shits,” a broken, rasping voice sneers from behind the Shadowmen, and I flinch, a sudden flashback of that same voice telling me he was going to fill up my filthy mouth making me stagger slightly.

Strong arms wrap around me from behind, and it takes everything in me not to thrash and scream. I take a deep inhale, drawing in the scent of summer meadows as I remind myself I’m not back in that attic, then willing my muscles to loosen and the tension to leave my body.

“Give her some space, Oct,” Prince orders firmly, and shaking my head, it’s like my vision returns, finding my guys surrounding me, the Shadowmen a few paces away. Oct releases me and tears spring to my eyes as my jaw tightens. I didn’t think the monsters still had me in their clutches. I thought that I was more over what happened than maybe I am, my nightmares lessening until I’ve only experienced the odd one.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, looking down, the first hot tear tracking down my cheek.

“You have nothing, fucking nothing to be sorry about, you hear?” Cas grits out. “Look at me, Cinders, please.”

I glance up, finding him standing close but not touching me, and the gap between us hurts. Releasing a breath, I step towards him, snuggling into his chest and just breathing him in. Toffee apples fill my nose, calming me and letting me know that I’m here, not back in that attic, and the monsters who hurt me are about to experience a world of pain.

Cas’s arms come around me, tentatively at first, then pulling me closer until there’s not a breath of space between us. We hold each other for a few moments, then taking a deep inhale, I pull away.

“Will you come with me?” I ask, my gaze darting behind him to where the four beaten-up men await.

“Always,” he answers without hesitation, taking hold of my hand and waiting. I take another steadying breath, then

slowly step towards the man who spoke. From our research, it's Lord Blackthorn and I can't stop the slight tremble that starts up at the sight of him, even powerless as he is.

"Well, hello there, petal," he coos, and bile stings my mouth at the memory of him calling me that before. His blue eyes are bloodshot, one almost swollen shut, and his lip cut and bleeding. There are marks across his torso, but I pull my eyes up before I get to between his legs, knowing that will most likely set off another panic attack.

"You don't fucking speak to her, scum," Cas snarls, baring his teeth like he's about to rip out Lord Blackthorn's throat with them.

"It's okay, Cas," I say, placing my free hand on his chest and looking up at him. His heart pounds against my palm, and I use its steady rhythm to draw strength from. "I just wanted to clear up a little misunderstanding."

"And what would that be, petal?" Lord Blackthorn asks, and I switch my focus to him. He's trying to act like an aristocrat, all noble and shit, but I know all about his depravity, and it makes my lip curl.

"You seem to be under the impression that it makes a difference if you know who we are," I tell him, my voice strong and sure. I straighten my spine as I look down at him, and the power that rushes through me knowing that he's at my mercy is a heady feeling.

He arches a brow. "Doesn't it?"

"Dead men can't talk, Lord Blackthorn," I inform him, the sound of liquid being sloshed around the room making him look around, the whites of his eyes beginning to show. The other men squirm, pleas ringing out as they're each covered in alcohol that was bought here for this.

I can hear some of the others leaving the kitchen, presumably heading to the rest of the house to spread the alcohol around and make sure it all burns.

"P-p-please, I can get you anything you w-want," Lord Blackthorn pleads, and Cas hands me an open bottle of vodka,

his other palm warm in mine as he keeps hold of my hand. I look into my rapist's blue eyes as I pour the liquid over his head and body, making him splutter and cough. They all fight their bindings, but it's no use, they're only causing themselves more pain as they try and fail to get free.

"I don't need anything you could give me," I tell him, my voice ice-cold as I watch the realisation sink in. His shoulders slump, seeing no mercy in my hard stare, his tears mixing with the alcohol as he comes to terms with his imminent death.

Finally, stepping away from him, I pass the empty bottle back to Cas, the others all coming back into the room. Hunter stops in front of me, handing me a glass bottle with a rag stuffed in the top, filled with clear alcohol and elastic bands. I raise a brow.

"Elastic bands?" I ask, taking the lit lighter he also passes to me.

"They act like molten rubber bullets and stick to the walls. Helps to spread the fire," he says before stepping back.

"Light her up, Little Sis," Oct commands, coming up behind me to wrap his arms around me. "You're so fucking hot causing destruction."

I laugh, bringing the lighter to the rag and watching it catch with my heart racing and tingles spreading across my body. I feel fucking alive, like for the first time in a long while all the colours shine brightly again. I pull my arm back, mindful of Oct behind me, and then launch the missile at the wall, the shattering glass and the whoosh of fire making my hair fly back from my face.

"Best kind of cocktails," one twin says with a sigh, and I look to the side to see his face limned in firelight looking all kinds of devilish. "Time to go before it gets too hot."

I take in the hellish scene before me; the men tied to the chairs all begging and pleading with us to let them go, but they didn't show me any mercy, didn't show any of their victims an ounce of mercy, so they shall receive none in return.

Turning my back, I let Oct and the others lead me to the back door, and we all exit the house as an orange glow spreads along the windows.

“We’ll stay and make sure it all burns,” Hunter states, giving each of my guys a handshake. “There’ll be nothing left by the time our guys are done.”

“Thank you, Hunt,” Prince says, looking into the other man’s eyes. “Really appreciate it.”

“It was a pleasure,” one twin says, a dark grin plastered on his face. “Dealing with scum like that is a special treat.” Then he reaches into his back pocket and gets out a bag of fucking marshmallows, pulling out some kind of extendable prong and placing one on the end before strolling over to the burning house and holding it out.

“Fucking degenerate,” Hunter scoffs, turning to me. “You’re welcome to visit Iris once things have settled.”

I tilt my head to the side, wondering exactly what things he’s talking about. Iris and I never fully shared our stories, though I believe she went through something similar to me, and as far as I know, she’s been released now, but I definitely got the impression that although she’d somewhat gotten over the initial trauma, there was something, some danger that she was still worrying about.

“I’d love that. Tell her I say hi, and thank you,” I reply, deciding that it’s none of my business, but that I would love to see her again. It was nice, is nice, having a female friend. There’s only so much testosterone that one girl can handle before she needs some girl time.

“Let’s go home, Sugar,” Prince suggests, taking my hand and leading me to our car. The twins each give me a kiss before heading to their car, and then I’m in the back with Prince again, snuggling into his side as the glow from the fire grows in our rearview mirror.

EPILOGUE

“LIFTS” BY LIA MARIE JOHNSON

EMBER

P *ea*ce.

My body loosens as we get out of the car at the top of the cliffs, the sparkling sea spread out before and below us, and the sounds of gulls filling the air as a gentle breeze makes the hem of my floral dress tickle my thighs.

The sound of the guys opening and closing the car doors and the boot fills my ears, then powerful arms are encasing me from behind, the smell of spiced rum filling my nose.

“It’s more than she deserves,” Prince murmurs in my ear, Cas coming up beside me with a small box in his hands. I sink back into Prince’s hold, taking a deep breath of salt-tinged air and letting the morning sun warm my face.

“I know, but we need the closure that only forgiveness will bring, Prince.” My words are soft, and he sighs, his breath tickling my neck just as the twins come up on our other side. “And even villains deserve to be set free.”

“You are too kind, Little Sis,” Oct says, and I turn to be captured in his bright blue eyes, shining just like the water below us. Reaching out, I cup his jaw in my hand and he nuzzles into it.

“Let’s get this done so we can go home,” I tell him, knowing that this will be hard for them. They hold so much

anger for Odette still, even though she's been gone for several weeks.

It was my suggestion to spread her ashes here, a place in Dorset I'd visited as a child with my parents and somewhere that always felt like a new beginning. There's something about being atop a cliff with the sea before you and the wind wrapping around you that feels like a fresh start. Like anything is possible, and it's all there, waiting for you to grab hold of.

It's quiet this morning, the sun having only just come up, so we're alone for the most part. Licking a finger to check the wind is coming from behind us, I step out of Prince's grip, taking the box from Cas and stepping closer to the edge.

"I forgive you, Odette," I say quietly, opening the box and tipping the contents out over the side. The wind picks up and takes her ashes out to sea, that sense of calm washing over me once more. Prince comes up next to me, taking my hand in his.

"I forgive you for never loving me enough, Mom," Prince whispers, his voice thick, and tears sting my eyes. "For making me into a villain too." He sniffs, and I catch the movement of his hand as he wipes at his eyes. A lump forms in my throat, but I remain silent, knowing that they all need to speak uninterrupted right now.

"I forgive you for killing my dad," Cas says, taking the box from me and gripping my other hand. "And for all the shit you forced me to do."

"I forgive you for taking our dad away," Kit states, taking Prince's other hand. His jaw is tight, his eyes full of storms as he looks out, but his shoulders lose all their tension as the words leave his mouth.

"I forgive you for forcing us to fuck all those women," Oct adds, his words a choked rasp as he takes the empty box from Cas before grabbing his now free hand.

We remain silent, holding hands for a long while, the sun high in the sky by the time we make a move to leave. A part of me feels like Odette didn't deserve forgiveness, that her crimes were too numerous and heinous to ever receive absolution.

However, without her scheming, without her unrelenting quest for money, we would never have been brought together. I might never have met these men who own every part of my broken soul and who are slowly mending it. Like so much in life, it's all shades of grey. There's so much bad mixed in with all the good, but you can't have one without the other.

"Thank you, Sugar," Prince whispers as he walks back to the car while holding my hand. "We all needed to let go."

"It was time to move on, we've got a lot of living to do," I reply, giving his hand a squeeze and pulling him to a stop. "So tell me, Prince, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

His lips quirk up into a smile that's so dazzling it takes my breath away, then he leans in, his plush lips hovering just over mine.

"Yours."

The End

Are you intrigued by Iris, Hunter and the twins? Well, don't you worry because I have their story right [HERE](#) for you.

Want to get a glimpse into life for Ember and her stepbrothers after the book finishes? Click [HERE](#) to download a bonus scene.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

About Rosa

Rosa Lee lives in a sleepy Wiltshire village, surrounded by the beautiful English countryside and the sound of British Army tanks firing in the background (it's worth the noise for the uniformed dads in the local supermarket and doing the school run!).

Rosa loves writing dark and delicious whychoose romance, and has so many ideas trying to burst out that she can often be found making a note of them as soon as one of her three womb monsters wakes her up. She believes in silver linings and fairytale endings...you know, where the villains claim the Princess for their own, tying her up and destroying the world for her.

If you'd like to know more, please check out Rosa's socials or visit

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